

Working Group Elastic organizations

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Moderator: Pascale Reinhardt, professional coach, France

Panel: Marijana Cvetkovic – NOMAD, Belgrad <http://www.nomaddanceacademy.org/>

Birgitta Englin – Riksteatern, Sweden <http://www.riksteatern.se/>

Kyu Choi – Asia now, Seoul <http://asianow.kr>

Jan Goossens – KVS, Brussels <http://www.kvs.be>

The 4 panel-members in the discussion around “elastic organizations” represented 4 very different organizations: a Belgian city theatre, a Swedish nationwide theatre, a Korean company and a Balkanian network. We soon discovered what they had in common: in recent years these organizations had grown or transformed themselves profoundly, being as such “models of elastic organizations”.

We talked about change & transformation, leadership, values & missions, and of course about money & funding. (As somebody told me in Stockholm, “when bankers meet, they talk about arts; when artists meet, they talk about money”).

As prelude: Elasticity as “liquid modernity”

As backbone for the discussion Marijana Cvetkovic proposed a presentation inspired on the book “Liquid modernity” by Zygmunt Bauman (Cambridge Press, 2000). See slides in attachment.

[Wikipedia: [Liquid modernity](#) is Bauman's term for the present condition of the world as contrasted with the "solid" modernity that preceded it. According to Bauman, the passage from "solid" to "liquid" modernity has created a new and unprecedented setting for individual life pursuits, confronting individuals with a series of challenges never before encountered. Social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life plans, so individuals have to find other ways to organise their lives. Individuals have to splice together an unending series of short-term projects and episodes that don't add up to the kind of sequence to which concepts like "career" and "progress" could be meaningfully applied. Such fragmented lives require individuals to be flexible and adaptable — to be constantly ready and willing to change tactics at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability. In liquid modernity the individual must act, plan actions and calculate the likely gains and losses of acting (or failing to act) under conditions of endemic uncertainty.]

Change & transformation: personal experiences

Marijana Cvetkovic –NOMAD (ND)

NOMAD was created in 2005 as an informal and flexible network to support contemporary dance in the 6 different Balkan countries, to enlarge their voice and create a strong regional contemporary dance scene in 6 different countries, with very different aesthetics. This was built on values such as mutual support and understanding. These values are the back-bone of their organization. This firm back-bone helped them achieving their goals, imposing these values in a post war and nationalistic context.

The platform is deliberately very flexible (elastic), there is no formal registration, and it's a collective of individuals with a horizontal structure.

Jan Goossens - KVS

The KVS was founded in 1880 and was for decades a traditional Flemish repertoire theatre company, closed to any evolution. Due to a huge financial deficit and the move to a difficult quarter of town (because of restoration of the old building) the whole project started to fall apart in 1999. A young team with a new mission was given a chance. The question was "Can the project transform or will it die?"

Jan Goossens and his team transformed it into a contemporary arts centre with a diversified palette of performing arts, a strong connection with the urban context of multicultural Brussels (only 10% of Brussels inhabitants speak Flemish, so this was a challenge for their funders) and the commitment to show also international work (with, among others, a focus on Congolese artists).

Birgitta Englin – Riksteatern (RT)

Riksteatern is a nationwide theatre with 42.000 Members, performing all over the country as well as abroad. Birgitta tried to transform this huge organization the last 6 to 7 years, trying to democratize the use of resources and the way to collaborate with other institutions.

For her, theatre is very connected to the birth of democracy: the whole idea of democracy was to hand out the power – not to keep it. Artists are very powerful today, they can start a revolution if they want to [look what happened in Egypt and Tunisia]. The way we collaborate with others is important, in order to enforce artistic power. In the same spirit, the project of RT and its values is "owned" by the 40.000 members.

Kyu Choi – AsiaNow (AN)

AsiaNow is a company representing several artists, founded in 2005 to creatively develop, produce and present Asian contemporary physical theatre, dance and interdisciplinary arts. The company is also strongly involved in creative development, consultation and performing arts management.

International audience didn't know much about Korean theatre until they started, but they quickly gained international interest. Then the crisis came and the interest dropped. To go on, Kyu had to think about ways to change his organization.

Internal factor of change: To produce change, Kyu says you have to trust your INTUITION. When you think about elasticity and the need of change, everybody says the poor finances are the problem. But that's the same everywhere. It is, after all, not a major problem ("But I have never heard somebody saying he has enough money";-).

Other factor of change: Analyze the environment. The first years AsiaNow was only focused on international touring, then they realized the local context was also very important, so they created a program providing a creative platform for artists, with artists' residencies, workshops and international collaborations. This was a way for the artist/producer to step back and think about what to develop in the next step.

Funding in the context of elasticity

Be careful: assignment can freeze you! Some examples:

- Riksteatern in Sweden: the government's assignment included they should strengthen the Swedish language. But there are 9 million Swedish speaking people and many Turkish people, and RT had lots of international collaborations. RT had debates with their funders and of course lost some after that.
- Another similar example comes from the KVS in Belgium: they are supported by the Flemish Community. Naturally, the funders would have liked that the KVS focused mainly on the Flemish inhabitants of Brussels, which only represent 10% of the city's inhabitants. Finally they decided to be more connected to the multicultural and multilingual reality of Brussels and convinced their funders.
- Testimony of Clyde Chabot (Dance Company in France): since 3 years she has support from government and grew from a small company with freelancers into a group of several employees. Now she has doubts about the funding because she's afraid to lose connection with her primary goals. It's a delicate balance between her initial desire and the assignment.

Conclusion:

- It's important to INTERPRET the assignment.
- Have a good communication with the funders to explain what you really want
- If funding seems to be against your goals, not in accordance with your mission, you'd better refuse it. It's more important to stick to your mission. Strong values as a strong backbone are therefore important.

Leadership

Good leadership is important in times of change and elasticity. The leader has to inspire the institution to see different ways of doing, to encourage the risk of transformation, especially those who are reluctant to change. Jan Goossens (KVS) tells us that during his first years he was more a “team builder” than curator, convincing every member of his organization – especially those who had worked there since ever – to be “co-owner” of the new project they wanted to implement in the theatre.

Leadership as team-work:

Kyu Choi (AsiaNow) tells us that in Korea, leadership comes from one person. According to Confucianism, leadership is about how we share values. But he thinks that from time to time it's more efficient to have a “new face”, to accept that your own leadership is not enough. It's more interesting with more leaders.

In his case, Jan Goossens (KVS) experienced that leadership was definitely not only due to one person, it was real team-work.

Leadership for the future:

The hard thing is to take leadership of ideas that we can't realize *right now* because of lack of funding, but we need to keep them alive to eventually realize them tomorrow.

Some advice to be or become an “elastic organization”

We talked a lot about the **values**: they form the back-bone of the organization. If this back-bone is strong enough, any organization can be elastic without harm. That's why it's important that you know what your values are, and that all the workers of the organization ‘own’ these values, that they are all focused on the same project. If you lose the ownership of your values, it's time to go.

It's not always necessary to be elastic: stick to your mission to decide whether change is necessary. Sometimes you'd better be elastic and transform in order to survive, but other times you have to stick to your idea, to clearly focus on your specific mission, without giving in because of intern/extern pressure (finances or politics). It is important to trust your own intuition.

Of course, one's attitude towards elasticity is very different whether you are in a small or a big institution. The need of elasticity has usually to do with the need of finances.

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