

# ARTS WEST COLLABORATION IN PRACTICE: SNAPSHOT

Arts West is a unique alliance of arts organisations who together reflect the exciting, vibrant and ever expanding arts and culture thriving in Melbourne's west. Since 2012, this collaboration has seen nine community-engaged organisations share their skills and resources to build capacity and power together.

## SUMMARY

Strategic collaborations – where many of the benefits of efficiency, increased capacity and impact occur – are long-term, intensive commitments centred on mutual goals. They require significant investments of time, resources and emotion by all involved.

Choosing your partners well is key to a successful collaboration. While it is a useful tool for amplifying limited resources, trust and relationship-building is an intensive yet crucial aspect of the process. Expect and require open communication about the resources available and contribution made to the group, and be flexible where possible.

Transformation on an organisational and individual level is possible in collaboration, but this way of working together makes big demands on participants. Be prepared to experiment, negotiate, reflect and revise your project, and to manage the uncertain nature of collaboration with openness and generosity.

## KEY LEARNINGS

### CONNECTION

- Why collaboration? Identify what motivations you and others in your collaboration have for being in the room. Do they align?
- Trust is key to successful collaboration. If your collaboration involves new relationships, ensure you allow for enough time for learning about each other.
- Your goal could be operational or strategic, or a mixture. Establish early on where you are heading, and schedule check-in points to review your goal.
- If your collaboration involves long-term strategic objectives, give members short-term outcomes they can see the benefits of and engage in quickly and easily.
- Does your collaboration need external expertise and/or resources to reach your goals? Bring them in as a collaborating partner.

### WORKING TOGETHER

- Learning together deepens collaboration and disseminates skills and knowledge more equitably across organisations.
- Be clear about where the collaboration starts and ends, particularly in strategic collaborations. What does consensus look like? Can members opt out of collective actions?
- Flexibility is key – with each other and with the collaborative actions.
- Recognise that working together in collaboration requires often intangible labour that can't always be quantified. Allow space for that to happen and be celebrated.

## SUSTAINED COLLABORATION

- Accept that there will be periods of slow progress because shifts in organisational priorities affect the resources and contributions made to the collective.
- Keep your strategic goals on the horizon, but make small, achievable steps towards it and celebrate those wins.
- Individuals need to advocate for the collaborative within their own organisations. The collaborative should also support individuals to do this work: through clear documentation, communication and through their own relationships and networks if necessary.
- The challenge here is to remain flexible – can you accommodate a variance in value/vision/mission amongst member organisations as long as the ultimate goal is shared?
- Membership within the alliance changed as organisations moved strategically away from the goals of the alliance, or organisational context changed. Have clear process for commitment and discussing changing engagement within the group – you are all there by choice.
- Do you all agree on the level of experimentation and risk you are willing to take on? Ensure you build in review points as this can change with shifting contexts.
- Similarly, how do you communicate about activities, as well as shifts in resources and capacity within the group? Don't be afraid to try a few different tools, especially if they are not working. Communicate: early, often and with clarity of purpose.
- If your collective is arranged around a common set of values, then consider what advocacy positions you a) would like to take as a group and b) others will expect you to answer as a group. Clarity on what is an individual or collective response is crucial.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Additional Resources can be found in the *Arts West Collaboration In Practice* document found on the Arts West website. <https://artswest.com.au>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funded by Gandel Philanthropy, the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation and supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria.



Arts West is a unique alliance of arts organisations who reflect the exciting, vibrant and diverse arts and culture thriving in Melbourne's inner west.

