

Writing: **Adapt and thrive**

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Learning how to embrace change and achieve it on its own terms has been hugely beneficial for Helix Arts.

Robert Laycock explains.

In December 2006, Helix Arts was one of 21 projects awarded funding for organisational development as part of Arts Council England's Thrive! Programme. Initiated during the build up to the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2006, Thrive! aimed to provide "A systematic approach to developing organisational performance in order to build capacity to respond to and influence a rapidly changing environment"¹. Helix Arts' ambition was to move from being a reputable regional organisation to one with national and international influence. We defined the business outcomes as: leadership – becoming a national leader in the field; growth – becoming a larger organisation; and sustainability – becoming a successful charitable business. To achieve this we invested in five key areas: market development, organisation development, product and practice development, research and building capacity.

Between April 2007 and March 2011 we grew from six to nine permanent staff. 2009/10 was our fifth consecutive record year in terms of turnover, project volume and earned income, and our reserves are now heading towards 25% of annual core cost. We have a new vision and mission that is attracting new stakeholders; we have an integrated business plan and robust finance, legal and ICT systems in place. Perhaps most importantly, we have developed a greater, more nuanced understanding of quality in relation to our practice and the practices of the artists we work with, and we are beginning to embed research into our programme.

We commissioned our own evaluation of this process in order that we could reflect on the journey and better understand the success factors. The report² summarised the following eight characteristics that appear to have contributed most significantly to our success:

1. Size – Helix Arts has grown, but everyone can still fit around the meeting room table: "Things didn't get lost in translation," Rowena On, Head of Operations.
2. Work in balance – all of the staff work part-time: "At least 75% wouldn't be here if that wasn't the case," says Toby Lowe, then Head of Programme. Andrew McIntyre, Fundraiser and Business Support Manager said: "It is just so healthy, people come in on time and leave on time, they never seemed really stressed."
3. Empowerment – everyone in the organisation has a voice. It is a hierarchical model, but staff sees that as a management strength, and not something that gets in the way of dispersed leadership. "It is unusual for a small arts organisation to have such strong hierarchy... but it is a strength. It makes our roles very, very clear. We each have a very specific role to play in the



organisation... It helps us to know that what we say counts,” says Kate Roebuck, Senior Project Manager.

4. Desire for improvement – “The key people when I arrived were all passionate about improving the organisation, and the way they do their bit of the organisation,” says Toby Lowe.
5. Interest in business practice – “I like working in this organisation because it runs as a business... It feels organised, it feels like a proper company in the sense that it is structured, has a clear focus on where it is going, plans in place and the right staffing structure in place to deliver that” (Kate Roebuck).
6. Using Systems – “When I arrived and saw the rolling archive shelves I knew this place was going to be organised... there is a lot of clarity. But crucially it is that everyone is happy to work to those systems, no-one sees them as a hindrance,” says Andrew McIntyre.
7. Open to challenges – The team copes well with challenges, it is the people that do this – that is why we thrive – they are up for considering new ways, and are willing to explore them.
8. Trust and Support – “We do look after each other and look out for each other, that keeps the stress levels low and the trust high,” says Yvonne Dobson, Finance and Administration Officer.

For us, the Thrive! experience can be summarised as: buying time out to do critically important thinking and development work; buying in expertise to provide guidance, support and new ideas and approaches; strengthening finances and investing in the team, and building reserves and nurturing talent; creating opportunities to experiment with new practices; building capacity to respond to opportunity. Thrive! enabled us to fundamentally rethink what we believe, what drives us as a team of arts professionals (vision) and what we want to achieve (mission). It has had a profound effect on almost every aspect of what we do. It has built our confidence as an organisation that really believes, and can increasingly demonstrate, our work is of international significance.

Looking ahead I think there will be more demand than ever for organisational development support as arts leaders and their organisations face unprecedented challenges, and opportunities. Thrive! offered a good model for organisations to set their own change agenda and then access the expertise and resources they needed to achieve that change on their terms. Perhaps it was this ownership, at an organisational and individual level, that defined our positive and lasting shared experience of change.

¹ Arts Council England, Evaluation of the Grants for the Arts Organisational Development Thrive! Programme, Interim Report, PriceWaterhouseCooper, December 2010.

² A Story of Change, Helix Arts' implementation of Arts Council England's Thrive! Funding, An Organisation Development Programme, Gayle Sutherland, A Creative Touch, December 2010.

Photo: My Take Exhibition, Helix Arts' Choices Programme. Photographer: Tony Griffiths.