

**Arts Council England's guidelines  
for boards of producing theatres  
appointing artistic leaders**

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## **1. Introduction**

This document is intended for boards embarking on a recruitment process for an artistic leader. It offers examples of best practice and poses some questions that might help to reveal the approach most likely to result in a successful, confident and artistically exciting theatre that is valued by its community.

Artistic vision and leadership is at the heart of every successful theatre company, yet how this is best manifested in the increasingly diverse work of building-based, producing theatres is a matter of debate. There are no hard and fast rules – each theatre will find its own answers based on its own values and circumstances.

## **2. Artistic leadership for the 21st century**

‘Your job will be to bring artistic vision, creative drive and strategic focus to one of the country’s greatest repertory theatres.’

*Birmingham Rep’s recruitment advertisement for its artistic director.*

### ***What do you want from the artistic leadership of your producing theatre?***

Before deciding which model or style of leadership is most likely to lead to success, it is important to ascertain or confirm the mission of the theatre: its vision and purpose. This approach ensures that artistic leadership – in an appropriate form – is at the core of the organisation.

Producing theatres are not all the same: the context in which they work and expectations of them are constantly shifting; the modern producing theatre, however, when operating at its best, is at the heart of its community. It responds artistically to its local audiences, its cultural ecology and to the wider theatrical context in the UK and internationally.

A producing theatre is a relevant space for a diverse group of people who feel ownership over it, who engage with its spaces in a variety of ways, from attendance at performances, to participation in its outreach and educational programmes, or simply using its café as a place to relax and meet other people.

Each theatre fulfils these multiple roles in a different way but to succeed, each needs to be a centre of creativity, open and welcoming, working with a variety of voices and a diversity of communities, audiences and, importantly, artists. It is a creation space, bringing together people for the creation of art and they invest in talent development and research and development – ensuring that

the theatre sector as a whole continues to develop its workforce and providing opportunities for new ways of working.

Producing theatres recognise the role that they play in the community in which they are based, contributing to an environment that people enjoy living within and which enables them to explore new ideas and experiences.

### **3. The board's role**

How does a board go about attracting and appointing the right artistic leadership for its organisation and thus achieve its goals?

#### ***The fundamentals***

1 What type of leader?

When an artistic leader announces their resignation, the board might consider the following checks in order to clarify what type of leader it needs to appoint.

- The theatre's mission – what the organisation is there to do – is it still relevant or does it need to be changed?
- The theatre's artistic policy – does it fit with the mission and is it something the board wishes to continue to pursue, develop further, or change entirely?
- The wider landscape – culturally, artistically – are there trends in the wider world that might have an impact on the theatre's activities and thus influence what sort of artistic leader would be best?

An outgoing artistic leader's work may have been successful for the last ten years, but someone else attempting to emulate their style may not be equally successful. It may be possible for a new artistic leader to achieve the mission of the organisation while developing the artistic policy. A board will need to consider not only the artistic track record and reputation of candidates, but also how those attributes could affect the theatre's relationship with its audiences and its future financial health.

2 The management structure

The board will need to decide what structure or model it wishes to adopt in relation to the position of its artistic leader and his/her relationship with the board and with other senior colleagues. It may choose to have a flexible approach to this during the recruitment process in order to allow consideration of different models that accommodate and maximise their artform development, community relationships, audience and talent development, and so on. (See Section 6: Structures within organisations.)

### 3 Recruitment matters

The board should decide on a strategy for the recruitment process, and who should be on the panel, remembering that Arts Council England reserves the right to be consulted about the recruitment of senior personnel.

A board might consider the following options for external support:

- an external adviser
  - to assist with the thinking process before commencing a recruitment process. An external person may be able tease out the necessary elements of the organisational mission, shifts in the landscape which might need to be considered and what might be a useful development for the organisation under its next artistic leader. This sets the framework in which the artistic leader will operate and therefore aids clarity in terms of what is needed.
- a head-hunter
  - who can make initial approaches to particular candidates and encourage applications in order to get the strongest possible shortlist. This could be the same person as the external adviser or a separate person.

It is important to ensure that there is the appropriate level of artistic expertise on the panel. If the existing board does not have a significant level of artistic expertise, it is a good idea to bring in outside help by inviting an external adviser onto the recruitment panel.

### 4 Supporting a new artistic leader

Once a new artistic leader has been appointed it is the board's responsibility to be clear about what success will look like and set a reasonable timescale under which this can be achieved and parameters on how the work will be judged.

It is also important to bear in mind that it takes time for a new leader to embed in an organisation, to make his or her mark and effect any changes required. It is the board's responsibility to continue to define the purpose of the organisation, and consider its relevance to a broad constituency of stakeholders in order to appoint an artistic leader who can fulfil the organisation's obligations. Therefore good communication between the board and artistic leader on what they are trying to achieve both artistically and managerially is important.

### ***Things to explore with candidates***

With due consideration to the above, there should also be a degree of flexibility within the organisation's artistic policy and therefore a sense of ownership of the artistic development by the incoming artistic leader. Some of the questions that boards and artistic leaders might jointly explore during the recruitment are:

- What is non-negotiable – that is, values or principles that must endure?
- What does the theatre exist to achieve?
- What does the organisation mean by artistic quality and success? How does it judge it?
- How does the theatre ensure that it remains relevant to its local population?
- What does the theatre want its profile to be in the wider theatrical context?
- What risks will the theatre need to take?

### **4. Qualities for artistic leadership**

An artistic leader needs to create ideas, opportunities and platforms for artistic projects to be explored. In placing value on invention and plurality, a producing theatre board needs to support one of the core values of artistic leadership: its unpredictable nature and capacity to surprise.

The qualities required for good artistic leadership are not definitive and it would be a tall order for one person to have them all. The following, however, may be considered:

- The candidate embraces the unpredictability of artists and the creative process, and imbues excitement in this across the organisation and its audiences.
- The person is an originator and impresario.
- The candidate is open to challenge, keen to engage with what they do not know or do not understand, and willing to commission others to help who are also originators of new projects and ideas.
- If the candidate directs plays, writes, performs or fulfils other creative roles in a production themselves, they are able to balance this with their other responsibilities within the organisation.

- The person is comfortable with the mindset of a creative producer and open to collaborating and bringing together creative forces and stakeholders.
- The candidate understands where the organisation is currently placed in the theatrical landscape and how an artistic vision can be implemented in this context.
- The candidate is able to evolve and develop the artistic vision in a direction that fits the mission of the organisation at a realistic pace and with due consideration for its audiences.
- The artistic leader's responsibilities are clearly the artistic core of the organisation but he or she must also know enough about finances, staffing structures, management and fundraising strategies, and how they all influence and react to the artistic policy.
- In liaison with relevant senior managers, the candidate can bring together the right team to deliver the organisation's mission and is interested in developing staff and artistic talent.
- The candidate can communicate the artistic vision to all the theatre's stakeholders including staff, artists, the media, collaborators, funders, sponsors and, most importantly, audiences.
- He or she has a good track record of previous artistic productions and can engage with and understand theatre at different scales and in different mediums according to the demands of the organisation.

### **5. Diversity, meritocracy, supporting the potential of leadership**

It has been acknowledged that it may be difficult to find an individual who is fully formed and capable of delivery of all of the above when recruiting a new artistic leader. There are questions around diversity of a candidate pool, how a board can support merit, and what to do if a board feels that a candidate has potential, but is perhaps not quite ready.

A successful theatre operating at the heart of its community, developing local talent and being strongly embedded with local people will eventually start to produce practitioners who are representative of that community.

In an open recruitment process, naturally the board would wish to appoint the best candidate. However, it is essential that there is an open attitude to potential. The best candidate may have slightly less experience in certain

areas. If he or she possesses the right vision and the potential to be a strong and collaborative leader, then the board could consider how best to support a recruit while they develop the additional skills they will need.

Cultural leadership has received a large amount of investment over the last five years with programmes, courses and seminars available across the country. These can provide an ideal support mechanism, alongside traditional mechanisms of support, such as mentoring, action learning sets or coaching.

## **6. Structures within an organisation**

### ***What is the best structure?***

Different management structures can work well for different organisations and there is no single answer; it is primarily about finding a balance across the different functions.

Business and management skills are, of course, essential to ensure stability and viability, but they are there to support the mission and the artistic work of the theatre, not as an end in themselves. A successful producing theatre must have artistic leadership and vision embedded at the core of the organisation. The three key skill-sets required in a well-functioning producing theatre are:

- a strong artistic vision
- good management
- an entrepreneurial approach.

These skills may be found in one person or may be combined in two or three persons.

Whichever structure is in place, it is crucial that there are clear delineations of role, responsibilities and reporting lines and trust and rapport between the senior management team, which should be constructed to accommodate the strengths and experience of the people involved.

Here are the three most common models, to help a board assess what structure might best suit the theatre's vision and the artistic leader under consideration:

### ***Artistic director as CEO***

The artistic leader is often also the chief executive officer. This has its merits as the organisation is led by the person charged with the delivery of its mission – the artistic output:

- The artistic director frames their role and priorities within the overall artistic vision and purpose of the organisation: artistic leadership is at



the core and the driving force; it shapes the whole ethos and shows to the wider community that the organisation has confidence in its leader and a focused commitment to the art.

- A creative person knows how to inject surprise and take risks. One could argue that if the artistic director is not in the prime leadership role this crucial capacity to surprise is at a disadvantage. Although making an executive director the sole CEO (see below) might ensure predictability and control, this could work against the unpredictable nature of creativity and hamper and limit artistic ambition.
- An artistic director as CEO can powerfully influence and shape the whole ethos, atmosphere and attributes of the organisation, making it more confident in starting the right conversations with other artists and creatives and enabling the theatre to become a platform for wider innovation, talent and ideation.

### ***Artistic director and executive director as joint CEOs***

The key argument for the power-sharing model is that the senior management is glued together by a common mission and broad artistic vision – combining their collective intelligence.

- The difference and dialogue in a power-sharing model might strengthen the outcomes and can more easily balance the range of sometimes conflicting and complex considerations that a producing theatre has to face – reputational, cultural, creative, managerial and financial.
- Shared ownership and ultimately responsibilities means that playing to each of the individuals' strengths could help create a confidence which makes for bolder decisions: taking difficult decisions requires a plurality of experiences and two heads are better than one.
- Depending on how much time the artistic director will be focused on his/her own direct artistic output – directing and writing shows or other artistic commitments – having an executive director on an equal footing with the artistic director can more easily fulfil some of the day-to-day obligations and help to avoid a sense of a vacuum within the organisation if the artistic director is often not present.
- An artistic director's closeness to the impact of any decisions, for example, spending on their own production, sometimes means they find it hard to take a balanced view. If the executive director has equal say in whether something should go ahead or not, it gives a practical perspective on decisions.

### ***Executive director as CEO***

Although it may not be considered ideal, this model may be necessary and can work well in certain circumstances. For example, an organisation may need to change to this model if it is undertaking a large capital project.

- An executive director as CEO in an organisation where there is also a full-time artistic director might undermine the artistic director's ability to fully implement an artistic vision.
- An executive director as sole CEO may be useful in circumstances where the artistic director is unable to undertake the full responsibilities assigned to this role.

## **7. Succession planning**

### ***Contract and terms***

The board should state clearly what the responsibilities of the artistic leader are. For example, an artistic director as sole CEO has clear fiduciary responsibilities – ensuring the solvency of the organisation and alerting the board to relevant financial issues in good time to ensure that they can make the right strategic decisions – in addition to his/her artistic duties.

Equally the board must be clear about the criteria for artistic success and how it will be reviewed on an on-going basis. A board should decide at the time of appointment whether to offer an open-ended or fixed term contract. There should also be a clear timeframe for measuring success, based on agreed criteria.

It is also advisable at the point of appointment to be clear with the artistic leader how much of their own artistic work, if any, will be undertaken. Some key questions might be:

- Is there a requirement for the artistic director to direct a certain percentage of the work or do they concentrate on developing the work of others?
- Will the artistic leader's contract allow for work to be undertaken externally from the organisation and if so, how much is allowed, what approvals do they need, and what, if any, are the financial arrangements between the artistic director and the theatre?

If these issues are discussed directly it will ensure that they do not become hidden criteria for future assessment or the basis for mission drift.

## **8. Further advice**

This is not a comprehensive guide on the practical aspects of the recruitment process, rather a tool to help with the planning stages of a recruitment process.

If you would like further advice on any aspects of your recruitment, including those practical aspects, please contact your relationship manager.

Good luck!

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