

The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts

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Background Information

Why is the Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts needed?

The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts helps producing and presenting organizations in theatre, dance, and jazz incubate and test innovative strategies to address major challenges or opportunities. Designed and managed by EmcArts, the Lab was established in response to demands from the performing arts field for deeper support for innovation over extended periods of time. We recognize that there is already widespread experimentation in the field. Rarely, however, do most organizations have the dedicated resources or time to test strategic ideas rigorously or to prioritize carefully among multiple potential strategies. As a result, achieving sufficient organizational consensus for the implementation of genuinely far-reaching strategic innovation is difficult, allowing only minor incremental change to prevail. Many field leaders continue to tell us, however, that the rapidly changing operating environment for American cultural institutions demands significant new adaptive capacities and strategies if performing arts organizations are to remain artistically vital, competitive, and valued by their communities.

The Innovation Lab has therefore been created to advance and accelerate the development of innovative strategies by providing performing arts organizations (selected on a competitive basis) with space, time, and resources to design and test new strategies for change.

What are the aims of the Innovation Lab?

The aims of the Lab are to help shape, focus, and propel strategies into implementation, and to establish a number of contemporary best practices in the performing arts field. The Lab provides a framework for innovation projects across all aspects of the organization and its relationship to its community. Examples of areas in which arts organizations are innovating include (but are not limited to):

- ◆ Engaging audiences, and the wider community, in new ways
- ◆ Rethinking program formats, venues, and approaches
- ◆ Involving the public in co-creating arts activities
- ◆ Using technology and the Web to create and engage with artistic experiences
- ◆ Reconsidering the role of the creative artist in the organization
- ◆ Restructuring the organization for new demands and new ways of doing business
- ◆ Partnering or merging with other organizations for greater reach and impact

How does the Lab define innovation?

Based on research into the literature of innovation, discussion with arts leaders, and reflections on our own work in the field, EmcArts has developed the following working definition:

Organizational innovations are instances of change that provide new pathways to fulfilling the mission, are discontinuous from previous practice and result from a shift in underlying organizational assumptions.



While not all innovations meet all these criteria, we have found that this definition provides a useful orientation toward change efforts and new strategies that are more than just incremental additions to business-as-usual. At the same time, the definition steers us away from new strategies that are only “novelties,” unrelated to achieving the organization’s mission. Above all, the definition draws attention to the foundation of innovation in an underlying shift in the organization’s assumptions – about its own processes and products, and/or about the external operating environment.

How developed must innovations be for participation in the Lab?

The evolution of breakthrough strategies is often represented as having three stages:

1. The emergence of “big ideas” from a background of no ideas
2. Moving significant strategic ideas to the point of sufficient clarity and ownership within the organization that they have a chance of being implemented
3. Getting fully shaped and supported strategies actually implemented

The Innovation Lab is focused on accelerating the progress of performing arts organizations from the second to the third of these stages. It is not intended as an idea factory, nor purely as a strategic planning initiative. Participants are expected to begin their work having already identified a major challenge and with possible innovative strategic responses under consideration. (We often call these “half-baked” ideas.) An organizational culture supportive of innovation, and a track record of strategic innovations (both failed and successful) are therefore prerequisites among candidates for participation in the Lab program.

What does the Lab provide?

The Innovation Lab is a nine- to twelve-month program in which EmcArts facilitators work with teams of staff, artists, and board leaders from participating organizations (“Innovation Teams”). The Lab includes individual coaching, group facilitation, an Intensive Retreat with specialized faculty, and a variety of extended support systems tailored to the needs of each organization.

Specifically, the Lab provides each organization with the following resources:

- ◆ Initial engagement by EmcArts facilitators with each organization’s leaders to explore and clarify the new strategy, strengthen the organization’s Innovation Team, and build momentum for the Intensive and subsequent strategy implementation.
- ◆ A five-day residential Intensive Retreat, shared by four organizations (attended by up to 10 people per organization) and co-designed with EmcArts, to catalyze implementation of the strategy (with accommodation and meals included, and a contribution of up to \$400 per person made toward travel costs).
- ◆ Faculty at the Intensive, including experts in innovation, organizational learning, and teamwork; one individual will be chosen in collaboration with each organization to meet project needs (with up to \$3,000 per organization available for fees, travel, and hotel).
- ◆ Up to \$2,000 per organization to provide stipends for unsalaried artists on the Team who would otherwise have to forgo a week of paid work to attend the Intensive.
- ◆ Follow-up implementation coaching and facilitation by EmcArts to support prototyping of the innovation (tryout activities in low-stakes environments).



- ◆ Post-Intensive Support Grants of \$25,000 to maintain organizational momentum toward implementation and to assist with critical follow-up activities. (Each organization will take responsibility for funding the full implementation of its new strategy.)

What would my organization's responsibilities be in participating?

Participation in the Innovation Lab represents a serious commitment over nine to twelve months by each organization, in order to make the best possible use of the resources offered. It is a condition of participation that the Innovation Team agrees to participate in all three Phases of the program, including the full five-day Intensive. Lab activities and responsibilities for participating organizations include:

Phase 1—Your project's Innovation Team, and other stakeholders as appropriate, work with EmcArts on- and off-site. Your responsibilities include: exploring strategic options, conducting a facilitated self-assessment, compiling relevant data, and constructing a detailed Lab workplan. Participants and EmcArts facilitators also co-design the Intensive content.

Phase 2 (Intensive Retreat)—Your Innovation Team, plus others as you decide, takes part in the five-day residential Intensive for its full duration. The Intensive serves as an “accelerator” to fully develop and build out your innovation, ready for prototyping.

Phase 3—Your Team works to prototype your developed strategy and to re-integrate it with your organization as a whole, supported by follow-up coaching and on-site facilitation by EmcArts. Prototyping, supported by a \$25,000 Support Grant, consists of one or more limited trials of your strategy, followed by evaluation and strategy revision.

Ongoing: Throughout your participation, you work with EmcArts on documenting your innovation and how you developed and implemented it. You also put in place an evaluation framework as your strategy is implemented, working with an external evaluator.

Who is eligible to apply to the Innovation Lab?

Invitations to apply for the first Round of the Innovation Lab are being sent to producing and presenting organizations in theatre, dance and jazz that were nominated, but not selected, for the Nonprofit Finance Fund's *Leadership for the Future* program. **Rounds 2 and 3 of the Lab will be open to all professionally managed producing and presenting organizations in theatre, dance, and jazz nationally.**

Partnership applications are also encouraged. Partnerships may include other organizations in or outside of the arts (including international partners), but an invited organization must be the lead partner. Other organizations included in a partnership application may participate fully in the Lab's activities.

Applicants should also meet the following specific eligibility requirements:

1. Stable artistic and executive leadership for the last 18 months
2. Board composition that is managed in an orderly fashion and is not subject to seismic upheavals in membership
3. A staff complement (full- and part-time) equivalent, in the aggregate, to no fewer than five full-time staff members
4. Ability to commit time and resources to the Innovation Lab, even if in the midst of another extraordinary major institutional initiative (e.g., a building move or a capital campaign)



Four organizations will be chosen for each Round of the Innovation Lab. The schedule for each Round is currently as follows (as of October 2008):

- Round 1: RFP released in October 2008
Innovation Lab Phase 1 begins in January 2009
Phase 2 residential Intensive held in April
Phase 3 runs from May through October 2009
- Round 2: RFP released in January 2009
Innovation Lab Phase 1 begins in March
Phase 2 residential Intensive held in June
Phase 3 runs from July through December 2009
- Round 3: RFP released in March 2009
Innovation Lab Phase 1 begins in May
Phase 2 residential Intensive held in October
Phase 3 runs from November 2009 through March 2010

What are the criteria for selecting participant organizations?

The Lab's criteria for selecting organizations draw on established research regarding organizational change and innovation. Research indicates that the following qualities contribute to effective innovation. We do not expect applicants to exhibit all these characteristics, but selection will be based in part on evidence of the presence of these factors in the proposal.

- ◆ Institutional capacity for innovative change (adaptive and inclusive leadership, organizational self-awareness, strong external relations, processes and resources for implementation)
- ◆ Cultural and structural support for innovation (evidence that independent thinking, idea generation, and challenging "business-as-usual" are valued and facilitated by the organization)
- ◆ Commitment to developing substantive new strategies
- ◆ Clear goals and institutional momentum
- ◆ Likelihood of deriving sustainable organizational value from the innovation

How can we find out more about the application process?

If you are interested in considering an application to Round 2 or Round 3 of the Innovation Lab, please contact Janis Auster, EmcArts Innovation Programs Manager, at the address below (preferably by e-mail). Janis will be happy to provide more detailed information.

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