

all together
a creative
approach to
organisational
change

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ALL TOGETHER: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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Contents

Acknowledgements	11
Sponsors' forewords	13
Executive summary	17
Prologue: the conditions for creativity	23
About this report	27
1 Challenges and change at the RSC	31
2 Ensemble	45
3 Actions taken to promote ensemble	57
4 Evidence of progress	77
5 The situation in 2010	103
6 Future questions	113
7 Lessons learned	117
Epilogue: the Hamlet crisis	131
Afterword	133
Appendix 1: List of interviewees	145
Appendix 2: The Royal Shakespeare Company	151
Notes	163
Bibliography	169

Executive summary

This report was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in February 2007. The RSC had embarked on a major programme of change in the way it is led and managed, to mirror the physical transformation of its home in Stratford-upon-Avon. The RSC wished to extend the principles of ensemble, as applied to the acting company, to the whole organisation, in both its internal management and external relations. This would be carried out by the management of the RSC, advised by the consultant Dr Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge. The cultural team at the think tank Demos was asked to follow this journey, observing the process and reporting back through this publication. The RSC hopes that the experiences recorded might be useful to other cultural organisations as well as the wider business community.

The concept of ensemble

Historically the RSC has described itself as an ensemble – a French word meaning ‘together’ or ‘viewed as a whole’. In the theatre, it has the specific meaning of a group of actors who work together in a collaborative fashion over a period of time. Over the last three years the leadership of the RSC has sought to extend what they describe as the ‘usefully ambiguous’ idea of ensemble beyond the rehearsal room and the acting company into the whole organisation. The principle has been used to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviours and practices.

Ensemble should be thought of not only as a management tool, but as a set of moral principles that remains constant as a guide to leadership decisions and administrative actions. Ensemble is a value, as well as a description of a

particular way of organising people: a way of being as much as a way of doing. It is also a moving target in that it can be rearticulated to meet changing needs and circumstances.

The principle of ensemble as an organisational practice

Organisations need to build systems that are not just optimally efficient in a specific set of circumstances, but capable of changing to meet new circumstances: in other words, organisations need internally generated resilience. In turn, that resilience is generated by creating shared terms of engagement – they cannot be imposed – that govern the relationships between different people and functions.

It is the job of leaders to develop both organisational interconnectedness, and the capacity of individuals and departments to work together. Instead of attempting the now impossible task of micromanaging specialised, knowledge-driven functions, leaders must pay attention to developing the norms of responsibility, honesty and trust within the organisation that enable people to work together.

Ensemble addresses exactly these questions of instilling behavioural norms through strong values, while reconciling the individual's needs for creative expression, reward, and liberty, with the need to be part of a social system that is efficient, responsive and liberating rather than conformist, restricting and inefficient.

Results of the application of the ensemble principle at the RSC

Organisational development, guided by ensemble principles has helped the RSC to achieve artistic success, improved financial performance and morale, and made operations and productions more efficient.

Leadership has played an essential role in aligning the values of ensemble with strategic objectives and organisational change. This has been achieved by employing rhetorical power

and judicious intervention, and by balancing organic evolution with an intentional programme of change.

Change is a continuous process, not an event. Most organisational change succeeds after five years, if at all (it is estimated that 75 per cent of attempts to change organisations fail).¹ At the RSC, significant progress has been observed after two and a half years, although the company still feels that there is more to learn and do, and wants to extend the principle of ensemble to its relationship with audiences.

Internal change processes need to align with external conditions. Creating a common understanding of external expectations of the organisation is one essential function of leadership.

Some of the organisational changes that have happened at the RSC are conventional, though not necessarily easy to achieve: improved communications; delegated responsibilities; more transparency; greater resilience; accessible leaders. Other aspects of the RSC's development are less conventional and offer useful lessons.

Distinctive lessons learned

Emotions are important - acknowledge them

A remarkable feature of the RSC's leadership and management style has been the regular and explicit reference to emotions. Very few leaders in government or the corporate sector speak openly about the emotions that everyone knows are a major feature of organisational life.

Leaders are at the heart of a network, not at the top of a pyramid

As Henry Mintzberg puts it, 'a robust community requires a form of leadership quite different from the models that have it driving transformation from the top. Community leaders see themselves as being in the centre, reaching out rather than down.'²

The realisation of creativity rests on collaboration

As a leading cultural organisation, the RSC lives and breathes artistic creativity. But every organisation has to adapt, innovate and be creative to some degree. The RSC's experience shows that creativity can only be realised through collective and collaborative endeavour, and the more that is facilitated – through good communications, a strong common culture, the creation of the right set of attitudes and so on – the more likely it is that an organisation will be able to experiment, and hence to innovate well, across its whole range of activities.

Conceptual simplicity is the best response to organisational and contextual complexity

Every large-scale organisation is complex, and every organisation exists within a changing and multifaceted context. Difficult and demanding tasks need to be underpinned by clear and comprehensible concepts that everyone understands and can feel part of, both intellectually and emotionally. The RSC is a compelling example of a complex organisation with a simple message: when asked what was the purpose of the RSC, our interviewees repeatedly expressed the same aspiration: to be the best theatre company for Shakespeare in the world.

found to given problems by making an open call to a number of people or a community), occur through the aggregation of individual decisions in an unorganised, but ultimately integrated, fashion.²⁰

The point to note about collaboration is that it is motivated by a desire to improve the product, service or outcome for *everyone* who participates or is affected by the collaboration. In the collaborative model, the input of the ‘consumer’ is assumed to improve the product of the ‘producer’ and to lead to a better outcome for both. At the RSC this means that organisational change through ensemble should benefit actors, the wider company, the audience, and the ‘product’ itself. This principle underlies the physical redesign of the RST.

Since audiences are increasingly able to participate in determining their desired outcomes in the commercial and public service arenas, they are likely to demand the opportunity to do the same in the arts sector. As Boyd put it in his New York speech:

*The time might be ripe for theatre to offer a better, more honest, more active and intimate relationship also between the performer and the audience. I sense a new contract being drawn up among young theatre-artists... and audiences that acknowledges the audience as part of this ensemble as well.*²¹

This is observable in the performance style of the RSC, exploited to the full on the thrust stage, discussed in chapter 3.

Ensemble leadership: a paradox

In an interview for this report, the RSC’s founding Artistic Director Sir Peter Hall said that the objectives of ensemble were ‘growth, security, confidence, continuity’ and, in his view, the words ‘ensemble’ and ‘family’ were interchangeable. But that did not mean that the rehearsal process, and still less the running of the company, was egalitarian. He was prepared to describe his own approach as autocratic, and added: ‘I don’t

believe it is possible to run a family, a tribe, or a collective, or whatever, without there being a boss.²²

The difficulty of striking a balance between the shared exploratory process in the rehearsal room and the imperative of being on budget and on schedule quickly became apparent in the course of our research. This is the ensemble paradox – that collective creativity nonetheless needs a defining vision and decisive leadership. There is a further paradoxical relationship between the practice of ensemble as a creative and administrative process, and the fact that the RSC is judged by its product: what ends up on stage. The key paradox, however, is that although the values of ensemble have to be held in common in order to succeed, the process of instilling those values throughout the organisation was initiated from the top down. The key to this process was for as many senior managers as possible to take responsibility for its development, as will be seen in chapter 3, where the Steering Committee and a larger Steering Group are discussed in more detail.

In conversations with us, Vikki Heywood, the RSC's Executive Director, acknowledged the paradox inherent in having to 'lead' an ensemble. The RSC, she told us, has to have a visionary Artistic Director but: 'the challenge then is to take that from an autocracy to an empowered group of people all working together to develop a vision'.²³

The challenge of ensemble leadership, then, is to align the achievement of strategic and operational goals with the organic development of a cooperative and empowered organisational culture. This is the subject of the following chapter.

3 Actions to promote ensemble

In this chapter we list the specific actions taken from 2002 onwards to re-establish the ensemble principle and which contributed to the process of spreading it outwards from the rehearsal room and the acting company to the organisation as a whole.

In setting out what the RSC did to promote the values of ensemble, and to change its practices and procedures, there is a danger of imposing too much retrospective logic. The process was less linear than a list of ‘inputs’ implies, and, in fact, combined:

- conscious interventions, including introducing external help to facilitate the change process
- leadership in the form of leading by example, providing rhetoric that reflected the organisation’s emerging narrative back to itself, and decision-making
- self-organisation in the form of organic change at individual, team and departmental level
- experimentation that sometimes resulted in setbacks, failure and frustration.

Nevertheless, the change process to date can be seen as happening within three main chronological blocks. It starts with the appointment of new leaders who decide on the need for organisational development and begin to make changes to behaviour, structures and practices. It continues with the decision to work with an external advisor and facilitator, and to have the process observed by external researchers, thereby making a public commitment to intervention and organisation-wide change. And the third stage, a significant mark of confidence, is to take control

of the change process through internal direction and a commitment to organic growth.

We have identified these overlapping periods as three stages in a continuing process:

- preparation
- mobilisation
- integration

Embedding ensemble throughout the whole organisation has not been, and perhaps never can be, completed. The next stage, consolidation, will involve continuing to increase the self-organising capabilities of middle management and staff, and the company is already examining ways in which to extend the ensemble principle to include its audiences as well.

Preparation

In 2001, a new governance and board structure had been formed, under the new chairmanship of Lord Alexander, with his predecessor, Sir Geoffrey Cass, as Vice-President. In June 2004, Sir Christopher Bland was invited by the board to succeed Lord Alexander as Chairman. The process of reconstructing and reconfiguring the RSC's senior management team had already begun. Vikki Heywood, who had just successfully overseen the rebuilding and re-opening of the Royal Court Theatre in London, joined as Interim Managing Director in September 2003, and was subsequently offered a permanent post, under the new title Executive Director. This title was felt to reflect more accurately the relationship with the Artistic Director, and the post's administrative responsibilities. While Boyd leads the RSC as Artistic Director, Heywood works closely with him in a 'duumvirate', and both are RSC board members.

Sir Christopher Bland told us that, at first, he was sceptical about the wisdom of the RSC being run by Boyd and Heywood as a duumvirate: 'All organisational manuals tell you that it will not work.' However, he now sees the chairman's

role as being to glue the partnership of Boyd and Heywood together, ‘not that it really ever comes unstuck’.²⁴ In his view, the duumvirate averts the potential problems caused by having either an Artistic Director who is not interested in finance, or a Chief Executive who is not interested in the creative work. Bland explained the importance of Boyd and Heywood’s partnership to the formulation of an ensemble vision for the RSC:

*Michael Boyd would have thought [in 2002] that it [ensemble] was an acting concept. With his support, Vikki Heywood has extended it to the organisation. She has enhanced his understanding of the concept.*²⁵

Bland described himself as overseeing a work in progress and an evolution, rather than a pre-determined programme of change.

Further changes were made at senior levels of the organisation. Andrew Parker, who had previously worked for an international publishing company and who had been a consultant on the RSC’s management restructure and served in an interim capacity, became Director of Finance and Administration in July 2004, with reporting responsibilities to the board.

Management structure

In order to improve communications, and reduce the hierarchical nature of the administration, a broad-based management structure was introduced.

Steering Committee In an unprecedented step for the organisation, Boyd extended the senior management team from a close-knit cartel of three to a much larger group of 12 all with equal say and equal status. Along with the executive trio of Artistic and Executive Directors and the Director of Finance and Administration, this group formed the new, expanded and more distributed senior management of the RSC. When we began this research, its membership had

been further expanded to 18 senior managers from a range of core departments, meeting weekly.

Steering Group This has a much larger membership, and combines members of the Steering Committee with less senior managers, principally heads of departments. It meets monthly and, in January 2007, had 55 members. The purpose of Steering Group is ‘to refine policy and feed back input from across the organisation’,²⁶

Boyd describes Steering Group as being operational and Steering Committee as being strategic. Heywood has been concerned to ensure that both Steering Committee and Steering Group take ownership of the change process by having responsibility for specific aspects, such as the development of inter-departmental working. The intention is to distribute leadership throughout the organisation.

While this process was under way, members of the RSC board began to take responsibility for policy areas relating to their own particular expertise, for example, fundraising, education or marketing – and to work closely with the appropriate members of the RSC staff. The effect of this was to integrate board members more with the organisation and bring board members closer to executive decisions of the RSC. Heywood had been conscious of the distance between the board and the rest of the organisation: ‘On this journey, we need to bring them in, because they need to understand why we are moving towards this model’.²⁷

Other steps taken to address this included a board and staff away day and opportunities for board members to observe management meetings. Board members are also actively involved in the building project for the new RST.

General recruitment

As opportunities arose, and the ensemble principle became established as an organisational idea, recruitment decisions were made on the basis of ‘people skills’ as well as craft and technical experience. Candidates were interviewed with ensemble in mind. In describing the interview process, one recruit said:

Ensemble was mentioned inasmuch as I couldn't avoid it...from the advert up to the moment I accepted the job; it was fairly high up the agenda as a key message.

Ensemble also came to play a part in the arrival of new recruits to the organisation. As part of the change process, induction became more formalised and expectations of new members of the organisation were made clearer. In 2009, Chris McGill, a member of The Histories ensemble, was commissioned to produce a short induction film, *Welcome to the RSC*. It features introductions to the RSC and its work, both organisational and artistic, by Heywood and Boyd, the latter speaking in detail about the RSC as a 'learning organisation'. Welcoming packs, including a DVD featuring the documentary, are now sent to all staff and actors before they start with the organisation. The pack includes a detailed description of who's who in the RSC and different departmental responsibilities, a copy of the latest RSC newsletter *Omnibus*, and details of the RSC's education work.

Artistic Planning

In addition to the management structure described above, there is a further high-level committee, Artistic Planning. As the name implies, it is devoted to the development of the RSC's theatrical programme and makes decisions about what plays will be presented and by whom they will be directed, designed and performed. Although the decisions taken by Artistic Planning affect all aspects of the organisation, prior to 2003 it was a small, closed group that was regarded as both exclusive and secretive.

In 2003, however, Boyd, in a radical move, expanded the membership of Artistic Planning to include the Education, Marketing, Sales, Finance, Executive, Fundraising, Commercial and Technical departments alongside the traditional artistic domains of Producers, Associate Directors, Casting, Literary and Voice. In 2007, Artistic Planning was extended further to include Estates, Human Resources, Development, General Counsel and Communications. This

more open process has allowed for more effective planning and organisational integration. It puts theatre at the heart of the organisation, and organisational considerations at the heart of Artistic Planning.

Basic functional improvements

One senior member of staff, involved in strategic decisions during the restructuring of the organisation, commented to us that the first things to be done were obvious:

There wasn't a management team and the work was clearly defined by roles and levels of authority... There was a lot to do to establish financial management, delegate authority and improve qualities of communication.

Some basic steps addressed these issues. Some of the earliest were taken in relation to financial management.

In 2003 responsibility for both departmental budgets and management was devolved to heads of departments, with the effect that by 2005 there were 'around 80 budget holders' in the organisation.²⁸ Later, the finance team regularly gave training to managers, and the Finance Director visited departments to explain financial procedures and how they fitted into the wider context of the RSC's accounts.

Another change was that the 'flattening' of hierarchy seen at senior levels in the early years of Boyd and Heywood's leadership was continued throughout the organisation: during the period of our research, membership of Steering Group grew from 55 in January 2007, to 66 in June 2009. Additions included middle managers from Human Resources, Production and Education. The remit of Steering Group also grew as Boyd, Heywood and others opened more areas of the organisation's business to discussion at that level.

Physical re-organisation

The decision to remodel the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon was in itself both a cause and a reflection of significant change. By designing both the

temporary Courtyard Theatre and the new RST around the principle of a thrust stage, the mental and physical barrier created by a proscenium arch separating actors and audience is eliminated. Both are 'in the same room', and the use of a thrust stage brings all seats into much closer proximity with the performance area. The maximum distance between audience member and the stage has been reduced from 27 to 15 metres. Similarly, the circulation spaces within the RST have been reconfigured to enlarge the possibilities of social interaction, including a seven-day-a-week events and exhibition programme.

In the summer of 2007, a new block of offices and meeting rooms was opened in Chapel Lane in order to accommodate departments that had lost their home when the old RST was closed. The new building's design was developed in accordance with the values of ensemble. Several departments that had been separate were brought together under the same roof, and the offices of senior managers were spread around the building. Instead of being brick-walled, as at the old RST, they are glazed and transparent. The majority of the staff sits in an open plan arrangement, joining different departments together. Corridor spaces, meeting areas and kitchens have been designed to increase informal contact. The foyer has room for large gatherings – on occasion social – and it also houses a bank of computers with internet access for use by actors, who are thereby given a reason to visit the administrative building. To keep Chapel Lane in touch with the theatre, monitors in the foyer screen live-feeds of the stage.

Mobilisation

Having started both a physical and managerial restructuring of the organisation, the next phase was intended to help motivate all members of staff to contribute to the change process by accepting individual responsibility for its implementation.

External support for the change process

In 2006, the RSC engaged an organisational development expert, Dr Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge, to advise the RSC leadership, to work with the internal change team and assist the process of spreading ensemble ideas and working throughout the company, and to facilitate a series of meetings devoted to change management. Together, she and the RSC's leaders planned a series of interventions in the form of meetings directed at opening up thinking within the organisation, finding new directions for the company, and exploring and communicating the values of ensemble.

The key principles agreed were that the change process and interventions should:

- encourage self-determination. The interventions would be directed towards mobilising the organisation to define ensemble for itself, to personalise and internalise its meaning and to increase the capacities of people to take their own decisions. Only in this way could organisational development become a sustainable practice.
- focus on middle management, because unless this group was engaged, change would be unsustainable. Ensemble needed to be co-constructed by this group, not be imposed upon them. Only if this group took ownership of ensemble would it become a true organisational practice.
- make the whole organisation aware of the need for, and the practicalities of change.
- link organisational change to the RSC's high-level strategy, so that people could see why change was necessary.

The appointment of an external advisor was in itself an explicit declaration to the organisation on the part of the RSC leadership that they were investing in organisational development on a scale that was intended to transform the whole organisation.

In January 2008, the change process was broadened to include the entire staff in a series of meetings designed in collaboration with Boyd and Heywood so as to allow the

organisation to discuss and determine what it collectively felt ensemble working at the RSC should look like, and how far it had travelled on the journey towards that goal. In order to encourage the participation of all staff, the process took the form of five identically structured half-day sessions involving everyone.

The externally facilitated workshops brought clarity to issues related to the change process and enabled disparate opinions within the RSC to be aired. They also created greater personal and organisational self-awareness and set some practical parameters. At the workshops, the organisation was asked where it collectively thought it was on the process towards becoming ensemble. Groups were asked to position the RSC on a road map, with a fork in the road ahead. The collective judgement was that the RSC had reached the fork, and that it had the potential to turn either way, becoming more or less ensemble. After the workshops, it was agreed that the process of implementing change had to be more fully integrated with Human Resources and more clearly communicated within the organisation. Subsequently, this indeed happened, with Human Resources guiding and communicating the process.

Taking the ensemble principle into the public arena

The ensemble vision of the RSC takes artistic practice as its model. Changes made there set the tone and conditions for organisational change. As the core of the RSC's purpose and activity, the success and response to the artistic work has been a testing ground and vehicle for the ensemble concept itself. As we have seen, one of the first major steps was The Complete Works festival, which opened the relatively closed world of the Stratford-upon-Avon 'campus' to visiting theatre companies with different aesthetics and working methods. This was a major challenge: asking the organisation to accommodate different people and techniques and move swiftly from one production to another.

Members of staff recall the importance of The Complete Works as a turning point:

We deliberately blew up the model with The Complete Works, and now we must continue on this journey of co-production, international awareness and multiculturalism... It can't go back.

From an actor's point of view:

When I had first arrived in Stratford in the winter of 1999... it could not have been more different. Morale was low and, I couldn't believe it, but actors just didn't want to be there. Now, the place was humming and it felt like the Edinburgh Festival with so many people from all over the world performing, watching, playing and enjoying.²⁹

Steps were also taken to open acting companies and the creative work up to the audience. The most fundamental decision was to alter and improve the physical relationship between audience and actors. The use of a thrust stage has produced a significant change in the relationship between players and the audience. It both extends and is complemented by Boyd's directorial style, in which he frequently asks actors to involve the audience, and in which characters either appear in or speak from different parts of the auditorium.

The actors continued this ethos of inclusion and reaching out as they began to engage more deeply in the educational work of the organisation (see chapter 4) and to work with amateur dramatic groups. Similarly, during *The Histories*, actors began to write blogs for the general public, describing life in the company. Actor Nick Asbury's blog was subsequently published as a book in 2009.

The process of developing the new RST has been central to the organisation's integration with its public. The designs for the new RST, with the specific aspects that embody the ensemble values described earlier, were made public, and its spaces have been planned so that the organisation and the public will come into greater contact with each other.

Reconfiguring the role of Human Resources

On her appointment as Director of Human Resources in 2005, Adele Cope set out to re-establish the department as an integrated, and more benign, function. In 2010, she described the challenges that she faced:

Beforehand there was an HR department that was asked to be quite different in its approach. I'm used to a much more advisory service of empowering managers to make their own decisions and to do so safely. So they probably took a fair amount of time to trust me, because they were used to coming in and being told what to do. Instead they'd come in to see me and I'd ask them what they'd like to do, and then we'd talk about how that could be achieved and if it was possible. So they became part of the decision making process, and that's very much the approach that I've taken, which I think also fits with the way the organisation wants to go.

Cope repositioned Human Resources as an advisory function and a 'go-to' department, empowering managers and repositioning them as accountable for management decisions. Specific appointments, such as the Training and Development Manager, were made to develop the capacity.

Improved organisation-wide communication and discussion

At the RSC, Human Resources covers many things beyond the formal management of people. Along with the Communications Department, led by Liz Thompson, Cope and her team have taken responsibility for many of the structural and everyday aspects of ensemble. General communication and information is conveyed via the weekly electronic and paper newsletter *Omnibus*, which is created by the Communications team, which manages a range of other internal communications channels. Human Resources and others have encouraged Steering Group members to use regular departmental meetings to communicate relevant information to those whom they manage.

Prior to Boyd and Heywood's leadership of the RSC, there had been little opportunity for the staff to come together

to debate issues of concern to them and have input into the direction that the organisation followed. There were occasional Full Company Meetings in which announcements were made, but these were ad hoc. Boyd and Heywood introduced a more regular structure for large-scale meetings. Three times a year there are full Staff Meetings that include actors. Importantly, Boyd and Heywood do not run these meetings as 'talking heads', imparting decisions and strategy to the organisation; rather, they run them as debates in which all are able to participate. Over and above these meetings, there are Staff Forums and Actor's Forums in which groups can debate issues amongst themselves. Full company meetings continue but are used on a very pragmatic and functional basis, for instance, to inform the entire organisation of press announcements of forthcoming seasons. As Heywood later explained to us, these changes were made with the intention of providing many more ways in which people can meet either departmentally or cross-departmentally, and allow ideas to be captured for the benefit of the organisation.

Beyond the communication of general information, however, Boyd, Heywood and other members of the leadership team also opened the values and motivation behind the change process to discussion. Specific developments were discussed at Steering Group level, exposing them to deliberation by heads of departments, managers and others responsible for their communication within the organisation.

Increased cross-departmental working

As part of the change process, greater emphasis was placed – particularly by Human Resources – on specific projects that would bring different departments that might not otherwise work together into closer working relationships:

- Discussions in Steering Group raised awareness of issues that affected behaviour across all departments. Specifically, these were recruitment and selection, management and team development, meeting structure and appraisals. Working groups were established, drawing together members of

- Steering Group from different departments to discuss these issues and make recommendations to the next Group meeting.
- The RSC began to use Tessitura, an integrated customer database for fundraising, membership, ticketing and marketing. The effect was to create a single system used by several different departments. Tessitura is itself a system that is continuously developed by its subscribers in the cultural sector.
 - Departmental ‘meet and greets’ also occur. Representatives of different departments either invite others to see what they do or visit meetings in other areas to explain their work. For instance, theatre directors from the artistic side of the organisation visited the IT department’s away day.

Integration

Having begun the process of change, it was necessary for the RSC to embed the ensemble principle by securing a permanent shift in the ethos of the organisation and establishing ensemble as ‘a way of being’.

Becoming a learning organisation

Human Resources took the lead in helping the RSC to become a ‘learning organisation’. Learning is at the heart of Boyd’s vision for the RSC: ‘if you are not learning, you cannot make art’, he told the board and Steering Committee in September 2008. This was both formal – connecting members of staff to training programmes – and also informal, as Human Resources initiated and coordinated the ‘Ensemble Learning Programme’ in which members of the RSC can teach each other skills that can be either professional, such as IT skills and understanding company finance or general, for instance classes in Shakespeare, gardening, rhetoric and public speaking.

Learning has now become part of the ethos of the organisation. Specific departments, such as Voice and Movement, have traditionally offered training beyond the acting company but new schemes were also put in place for all staff. Learning and the enhanced communication of information and knowledge within the organisation went

hand in hand. A programme of work shadowing has been introduced. For instance, front of house Manager, James Kitto, shadowed Vikki Heywood. Heywood herself shadowed the Costume Department during *Julius Caesar* in 2009. Over the course of 2008/09, more than 80 members of staff shadowed each other in this way and more are scheduled to do so in the future. Learning opportunities are also themed around productions: during the 2009 Russian season, Russian language classes were made available and lectures for the acting company were opened up to other members of staff.

Leadership training

In order to improve standards of leadership throughout the organisation, the decision was taken to offer all members of Steering Group who wished to do so the opportunity to take part in the leadership training schemes set up by the national Cultural Leadership Programme. To date, 24 managers from the RSC have attended the Clore Short Course, an intensive, two-week training course delivered by the Clore Leadership Programme at a cost of around £1,300 per attendee. A further two managers are to attend a similar course in March 2010. The training represents a significant investment of time and money by the RSC, and attendees have been keen to apply the lessons learned.

Education

In addition to recognising the importance of learning within the organisation, the Education Department took on greater importance in the RSC's public profile. With the Education Department represented in Artistic Planning, programming was connected to the school curriculum and focused on the needs of schools. From *The Histories* onwards, actors worked directly on teacher training programmes as part of the RSC's national Stand Up for Shakespeare campaign. Some were also supported in undertaking postgraduate teaching awards at the University of Warwick; 25 actors will have qualified by the end of 2010. The RSC took an ensemble approach to these ventures, working with schools as clusters and establishing The

Learning and Performance Network, a network of partnerships across over 300 communities nationwide. The RSC's education work is explored further in chapter 4.

Giving recognition

Ensemble values depend upon recognising the value of others' contributions, and individuals feeling that their own work is valued in return. Changes were made to increase recognition of both individual contribution and organisational achievement:

- The section of the website, 'Behind the scenes', now details the story of how a production is put on, and the contribution of many different departments.
- More departments are represented in managerial groups, such as Artistic Planning, Steering Group and Steering Committee.
- In an unprecedented step, in 2008 recent artistic work began to be discussed at Steering Group level, with board members present: different departments across the organisation, outside what is conventionally thought of as the artistic sphere, were given the opportunity to critique the work on stage.
- The organisation-wide newsletter *Omnibus* includes space in which aspects of organisational life, such as specific contributions to a particular performance, people's birthdays and staff departures, can be mentioned and achievements recognised.

Conviviality

The more structural changes put in place to support ensemble have also been complemented by attempts to encourage an informal sense of togetherness. The open-plan design of Chapel Lane, for instance, was conceived with conversation and communication between people from different departments in mind, but further changes were also made that created opportunities and circumstances through which the organisation could come together. 'Cake Friday' is held monthly and hosted by different departments. It arose from discussions with Heywood in which staff consistently mentioned the need for more social gatherings. The new staff catering facilities for the rebuilt RST have been designed so

that as many staff as possible can eat together. There are also twice yearly 'staff night' performances in the theatre. Other occasions for coming together are the RSC choir and informal classes such as yoga.

Web presence

As observed in chapter 2, changes at the RSC coincided with dramatic shifts in attitudes to collaboration and participation in organisations and society more widely. In this way, some of those changes were intended not only to impact upon the workings of the organisation, but simultaneously to find new ways to connect the RSC to its audiences and communities. In common with many organisations in the cultural sector, the RSC responded to online opportunities. A new role, Head of Digital Media, was created within the Communications Department. New sections were added to the website including a feature on ensemble in which each actor is given a profile page, introducing the audience to the actors that they see on stage, and blogs by actors from within most of the RSC's current acting companies including The Histories and onwards. The RSC is also working with Channel 4's 4IP project to create a play using Twitter. In this way, the website is developing from being a tool by which potential audiences can find out about performances and book tickets to becoming an embodiment of ensemble.

Visual identity

Change was also marked by a new visual identity implemented by the Marketing Department in 2004. The RSC's new colour scheme of red was applied, from the bars and seats of the Courtyard and the offices at Chapel Lane, to the website and the stationery and business cards used throughout the organisation. Walking around the theatres and the streets of Stratford-upon-Avon, it is also evident on company vehicles and as the colour of sweatshirts worn by employees. In response to audience feedback, front of house staff have adopted a standard uniform that is much more informal. The transformation of the RSC's appearance

is echoed in the way in which members of staff interact with the public. The redesign of posters, programmes and website combine to convey the message that the RSC is an ensemble organisation.

Leadership style

Boyd and Heywood adopted and developed a leadership style that established the ethos of ensemble working. Boyd dispensed with perks such as a chauffeured car, and a stricter and more equal expenses policy was introduced. People also took on leadership roles for themselves. For instance, as the members of the wider Steering Committee took greater strategic ownership of their respective areas of operation, they changed their behaviours accordingly. This was fundamental to the success of the project. Later, through workshops facilitated by Dr Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge, this principle of taking on leadership was spread out to Steering Group.

When the new administrative offices were created at Chapel Lane, Boyd and Heywood chose offices at either end of an open plan area so that they had to walk through a 'pool' of staff in order to meet each other; equally, staff would not have to go to a focused, area of power' to meet them.

Boyd and Heywood took care to be approachable and always available to staff. One incoming member of the organisation remarked that in his previous job:

There was a vast gap between me, and the director... Here, there's no barrier between me and Vikki and Michael, and certainly no problem saying 'I'd like a quick chat with Vikki', which would have been unthinkable with the director [in my previous organisation].

In particular, the Human Resources and Communications teams were careful to communicate the change programme with a light touch. Where possible, change was made manifest through actions rather than instilled in a publicly branded initiative.

Looking outwards

As well as addressing the RSC's internal organisation, the concept of ensemble has helped it to look outwards and to play a role in the local, regional and national community. The RSC has sought to establish good relations with the people of Stratford, and strengthen links with the West Midlands in general. This has meant that the RSC has come to be seen as a local partner and a local contributor, helping to influence local transport policy and regional development, working both with neighbouring arts organisations and local businesses. The RSC also has a national role as a leading arts organisation, seeking to influence government arts, education and economic policies, and taking a lead in the Cultural Olympiad as part of the London 2012 Olympic Games.

7 Lessons learned

In this chapter we suggest what other organisations might learn from the RSC's experience. These are grouped under three headings: leadership, networks, and creativity and change.

Organisational change is a non-linear process, affected by pre-existing organisational culture, the relationships between individuals, and specific external circumstances, all of which applied in the case of the RSC.

It is for these reasons that we have titled this chapter 'Lessons learned' rather than calling it a 'toolkit'. We firmly believe that the RSC's experience offers valuable lessons that have a more general application, but we caution against the idea that replicating language, structures or practices from one organisation into another inevitably generates predictable results.

Leadership

As we have seen in chapter 2, it is a paradox of ensemble that the organic development of a co-operative and empowered organisational culture nevertheless depends on the direction and coherence provided by leadership. The RSC's progress over the course of our research clearly demonstrates the need for effective leadership. What we mean by 'effective leadership' is the ability to marry rhetorical power with practical innovations so as to create a sustainable, resilient, well-networked organisation, capable of growing its own capacity to act, and providing high-quality results for its customers, staff and funders.

Leadership should be shared and distributed

The RSC's story shows that it is not the titles and conventions of leadership that matter, but what leaders do and how they

do it. Much of the rhetoric around leadership concentrates on the individual – ‘the right person at the top’ – but research shows that companies, in the creative sector at least, may have a single individual as the public face, but have strong teams acting as collective leaders.⁵² At the RSC – and in theatre and the arts more widely – the model of explicit shared leadership between artistic and managerial roles is far from novel: the National Theatre, for instance, has both an (Artistic) Director and an Executive Director. Other sectors should learn to think of leadership as embedded within a wider group, and as a flexible activity that can be successfully shared in many ways. The generally accepted term for this in leadership theory is ‘distributed leadership’.⁵³

Leaders need to use the right language and metaphors

It has been important to find some word or term that both acts as a metaphor for distributed leadership and fits organisational culture. At the RSC it has been the term ‘ensemble’. Other organisations will need to find a phrase that fits their own culture and sector, but everyone needs a shorthand that sends the same set of messages: that people will have a voice, take responsibility for both themselves and others, and work to a common end. Whatever term is chosen, it needs to be adaptable to the way that the organisation develops, and leaders must be alive to when the language needs to change.

Leaders need to embody the values that they promote

Strong and distinctive organisational cultures, resting on explicit values, have been recognised as key factors in successful organisations.⁵⁴

References to values are a constant feature in the RSC’s ensemble journey. Boyd has repeatedly emphasised the need for honesty, altruism, tolerance, forgiveness, humility and magnanimity. One of the main tasks of leaders is to articulate and reiterate organisational values and link them, in one direction, to the individual and, in the other, to the wider world.

Any disparity between the rhetoric of values and what happens on the ground damages organisations (as Google

found out when the gap between its corporate slogan ‘Don’t be evil’ and its dealings with the Chinese government created a storm of protest).⁵⁵ Equally, values need to connect inwardly so that they are apparent in everyday practices and the quality of relationships. When the values expressed are disconnected from the norms of behaviour within an organisation it leads to cynicism, and poor morale and performance.

But leaders cannot simply communicate values – they have to do more. In an organisational context, discussion of values can often seem artificial and remote from everyday life. Lofty pronouncements from the board or CEO seem divorced from the pressures of getting things done. Leaders have to provide the spaces and places, and the time, for values to be explored, discussed, disputed, agreed and internalised. They also have to ‘walk the talk’ and be personally responsible for living up to the organisation’s values.

Sustainable organisational change can only come about if the rhetoric of the way the organisation operates is matched by the quality of relationships that it produces.

Leaders need to lead the change process

Organisational change, wherever it is attempted, takes place in a context where the organisation is busy and short of time, where external factors demand attention, and where there will be some internal resistance. Organisational development is easily set back by such obstacles, but all of them should be expected and anticipated by leaders who want to foster change, even though the particular forms taken will be unpredictable. Leaders need not only to demonstrate confidence in the change process but also to be deeply involved in the minutiae of change: sustainable change can only come from within, it cannot be imposed from without. Leaders must also be committed to leading the change process: they can use external help and support, but change cannot be sub-contracted or outsourced.

Leaders must acknowledge emotions

A remarkable feature of the RSC’s leadership and management style has been the regular and explicit reference to emotions.

In his speech at the New York Public Library in June 2008, Michael Boyd used words like terror, daring, fear, empathy, compassion and love, 'which I say without any apology'. Indeed he uses the word 'love' ten times.⁵⁶ Very few leaders in government or the corporate sector speak so openly about the emotions that everyone knows are a major feature of organisational life. There are exceptions. In the Institute of Directors' magazine, *Director*, of June 2009, Tim Smit of the Eden Project was described as 'an inspirational leader' partly because 'he marries vision and emotion with pragmatism'. But acknowledging emotions is seen as odd and mysterious – the magazine article is titled 'Casting a spell'.⁵⁷

Leaders often avoid talking about the emotional life of an organisation – it is seen as odd, embarrassing, and soft. But emotions exist, and when harnessed in the right way, are a powerful force. As Linda Holbeche, an expert in organisational change, says:

*Managing change effectively requires more than an intellectual understanding of the processes involved. It requires... real emotional, political and some would say spiritual intelligence on the part of those leading change.*⁵⁸

Leaders should provide conceptual simplicity in response to organisational and contextual complexity

Every large-scale organisation is complex, and every organisation exists within a changing and multifaceted context. Difficult and demanding tasks need to be underpinned by clear and comprehensible concepts that everyone understands and can feel part of intellectually and emotionally. A good example of an organisation that got this right is NASA. When President Kennedy visited the NASA Space Centre, he asked a cleaner what his job was, and the cleaner replied: 'Putting a man on the moon'. The RSC offers a more modest, but equally compelling case of a complex organisation with a simple message. When asked what was the purpose of the RSC, our interviewees repeatedly expressed the same aspiration: to be the best theatre for Shakespeare in the world.

Leaders are at the heart of a network, not at the top of a pyramid
As Henry Mintzberg puts it:

*A robust community requires a form of leadership quite different from the models that have it driving transformation from the top. Community leaders see themselves as being in the centre, reaching out rather than down.*⁵⁹

In chapter 4, we show how the RSC moved from visualising the organisation as a hierarchy to seeing it more like a mind-map, see figure 10, with leadership placed as a central resource. Creating strong networks is one of the most vital tasks of contemporary leadership.

Networks

It is important to create and strengthen networks within organisations

There are numerous examples of how new and strengthened networks have helped the RSC to operate to better effect. Networks are important because:

- They encourage innovation: networks create links that allow things to happen – for example the commercial exploitation of a new lighting invention at the RSC became possible because of the newly forged relationships between half a dozen departments, see chapter 4.
- They promote efficiency: networks produce collective, effective and speedy decisions – for example the changes in artistic forward planning detailed in chapter 3.
- They make organisations resilient: networks enable self-organisation and generate the capacity to respond to events in the right way.
- They promote individual welfare: networks allow individuals to flourish within a collective, because they provide support, and connection to a greater whole.

Networks need a common language of words, metaphors and symbols

The words that leaders use have to resonate and have meaning across a whole organisation. A common language helps networks to form and eases communication. Ensemble is a founding concept at the RSC, and the word itself appeals both to tradition and to the specialism of a particular discipline – the theatre. It thus helps to create unity. The word ‘group’ or ‘team’ could have been used instead of ensemble but neither would have had the same resonance or the same sense of history.

Networks grow organically, and it can also be helpful to use words, like ensemble, that are ambiguous, because that allows for development, creativity and exploration.

Within networks, seemingly small acts and moments can gain extraordinary potency – both positive and negative. Leaders need to have heightened sensitivity to the way that meaning gathers around symbols and metaphors and the way that people project big ideas onto the detail of their lives. For example, in addition to changing the way that networks operate through interaction in physical space, the new RST building will be a powerful symbol of a renewed RSC. In a sense, it will be a multi-million pound metaphor for the way that the organisation has changed not only itself, but also its relationships with the outside world – from its audiences to its locality and to its supporters.

Networks are strengthened through learning and self-reflection

The RSC has created many formal and informal opportunities for people to learn not just about things that are immediately relevant to their jobs, but much more widely, see chapter 3. Our conclusion is that learning is valuable not only for the individual, but also because it increases the number and quality of interactions in an organisation, leading to more conviviality, better communication and improved mutual understanding.

One feature of the RSC’s development over the last seven years has been continuous self-reflection. At various points on the path to changing the organisation, leaders and larger

groups of staff have taken stock of where they have come from, where they are and where they are going. The techniques used to undertake self-reflection have ranged from a consciously structured whole-company staff survey, through managerial or departmental gatherings, to one-to-one meetings.

Self-awareness within a network creates constant sources of feedback, which mean that corrective or beneficial action takes place more speedily, and can take the form of ‘nudges’ and ‘tweaks’ rather than sudden and violent changes of direction. An example is the way in which the use of the word ensemble is itself being slowly dropped from written communications and in discussions because it has started to become overused.

Networks need to be open and transparent

The RSC has moved from being a hierarchical organisation steeped in secrecy, where information was closely guarded and decisions taken by individuals or small groups, to one that is much more open. This has been particularly the case in the Human Resources, Finance and Artistic Planning departments. The beneficial effects of these changes and the resultant gains in efficiency are detailed in chapter 4, but it should be noted that these gains have been made possible by the relatively free flow of data and information around the networked organisation. The more information moves around a network, the more the network itself is strengthened.

Networks help overcome ‘silos’

Studies attest to the fact that people work better and are happier in their work when they have a large degree of autonomy and control over what they do.⁶⁰ The experience of many companies confirms that flattening hierarchies, giving people more responsibility, and encouraging questioning, improves performance.

However, the simple devolution of power risks creating silos and a series of units at war with each other. It can also lead to inefficiencies when disparate ways of doing things fail to mesh with each other. The desired state is therefore

one where autonomy, individual responsibility and collective responsibility all increase.

Combining individual action with systemic consistency across a networked organisation (as opposed to directing action through a hierarchy) depends on people trusting each other. As Paul Skidmore puts it in *Network Logic*:

*Leaders carry responsibility to preserve the trust on which their networks depend. In an unpredictable world in which some failures are almost bound to happen, that is a tough challenge. Acknowledging our interdependence with others, and the limited capacity of our leaders to manage it, will be a frightening experience. It is much more convenient to think that leaders will be saviours – and that we have someone to blame when things do not go our way. But if it wakes us up to the potential within each of us to solve our own problems, then so much the better.*⁶¹

At the RSC, it is recognised that leaders cannot have all the answers, but there is a strong belief in the leaders' sincerity, and that they will always try to do the right thing. As one member of the team put it:

They [Boyd, Heywood and other senior managers], the powers that be, are trying to make it a positive and uplifting experience for everyone and I think that it is working.

Sensitivity to individual perspectives and recognising that everyone's contribution increases a sense of belonging

The RSC has found a number of ways to accommodate the needs of individuals and has acted to make sure that those needs are met. One example is consideration of different standpoints on organisational decisions. As one interviewee put it: 'You actually do matter... There is a genuine effort to make each person a valued member of staff.'

In addition, efforts are made to recognise everyone's contribution to the organisation. For example, the RSC lists all staff alphabetically within their departments in its performance programmes (as reproduced at the end of this

report). This seemingly small idea is emblematic of something that is in fact very important. It demonstrates the RSC's ecological sensibility – that is, it shows an understanding that every part is needed to make a whole, and that every element is as vital as every other in creating a complete system. This is recognised in management theory:

*In a context that is fast-moving, complicated and unpredictable, the notion of organisations as living, complex, adaptive systems seems particularly apt.*⁶²

It is also recognised in other successful companies, such as Pixar, where:

*The technical people and the artists are peers with each other. We do not have one in a second class to the other, we don't think that one is more important than the other; rather they're all coming together for the purpose of the story.*⁶³

Networks are powerfully affected by buildings and design

As described in chapter 3, during the period of our research, different parts of the RSC have moved premises, and people were doing their jobs in different spaces and places, be that offices or theatres.

The experience of the RSC shows that physical remoteness is difficult to overcome, and that it is easier to form working relationships when everyone is together in the same place. What is equally clear is that buildings and spaces have affects as well as effects. In other words, places have their own psycho-geography, and the quality of the relationships within a network is affected by the way that physical spaces encourage or inhibit contact and communications. The thrust stage at the RST clearly demonstrates this understanding, as it is intended to transform the relationship between actor and audience.

Creativity and change

Organisational change is not easy. According to Linda Holbeche: 'Various reports suggest that 75 per cent of all transformation efforts fail.'⁶⁴ Leaders have to hold in balance on the one hand an organisation's creativity and desire to change, and on the other its continuity, established culture and traditions.⁶⁵ The experience of the RSC shows some ways in which this can be done.

Crisis can provide an opportunity for change, but ambition and energy are what make change happen

President Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, is credited with saying: 'You never let a serious crisis go to waste. They are opportunities to do big things.'⁶⁶ Bill George, Management Professor at Harvard, says the same thing: 'Never waste a good crisis.'⁶⁷ The RSC's experience bears witness to the fact that people are more willing to accept radical change in times of crisis.

But once the need for change is recognised, the next step is to create a sense of coherence, so that effort can be directed to a shared set of priorities rather than dissipated in a flurry of fire-fighting responses. The RSC's experience shows that big, ambitious priorities concentrate effort and energy.

Over the last five years the RSC has set itself a number of tasks that have stretched every fibre of the company, including the staging of The Complete Works Festival, The Histories, Stand up for Shakespeare, and the remodelling of the RST, Chapel Lane and other parts of the organisation's Stratford-upon-Avon estate. It is the scale of the ambition and the clarity of the goals that have provided the context in which many different detailed tasks have come together to produce the desired results. A big, shared ambition encourages collaboration. It helps generate responsibility and encourages communication and efficiency because people realise that the goal can only be achieved by working together.

The experience of the RSC shows that energy is needed to push organisational development forward. That energy can be injected by leaders (such as when Boyd and Heywood

address meetings); it can come from external sources (such as outside facilitators); and it can come from creating 'pulse points' where the whole organisation is stretched to achieve a specific goal.

Experimentation and constant small-scale innovations help change to happen

There are many advantages in undertaking organisational innovation on a limited but continuous experimental basis because such an approach:

- is less threatening than major change
- can be retracted if the innovation proves problematic
- is easier to slow down or speed up than large-scale change
- is less expensive than wholesale change
- creates momentum and stimulus
- focuses energy
- develops confidence
- provides opportunities for celebration
- acknowledges that different parts of an organisation move at a different pace

A good way to experiment with change is through inter-disciplinary, task-oriented, time-limited teamwork. The RSC set about addressing a number of issues, such as the feeling that there were too many meetings, by setting up teams of people from across a range of departments to come up with suggestions for reform. These endeavours were not always 100 per cent successful, and some people thought that too much time was spent on meetings and discussion through this process. Nevertheless, our view is that setting up teams of people who bring different experience and perspectives to a specific task which they have to achieve within a particular time (in this case in no more than three meetings) is a good approach. It works best where expectations of the process and the potential outcomes are set in advance, and where there is a level of commitment to implement the suggested changes so that people don't feel they are wasting their time and effort.

Changing things depends on creating confidence and trust

Leaders need to develop the confidence of their staff that what they are doing is right and will work. The RSC did this partly by seeking outside advice and validation to affirm what they were doing, but they then understood that they needed to ‘ride their own bicycle’. Implementing change is also helped when there is trust in leadership – not necessarily trust that leaders will always get it right, but trust that they will try to do the right thing, and always act in what they believe to be the best interests of the organisation and the people within it. Creating and maintaining trust is a tough challenge, but is also one of the most important tasks of contemporary leadership.

Change needs to be tested internally and externally

One danger of change processes within organisations, with their accompanying concentration on internal focus and more frequent discussion groups, is that they can lose touch with external realities. Inspiring rhetoric and charismatic leadership on their own are not enough. Once a company believes its own propaganda it is in dangerous territory, as the case of Enron clearly shows. The RSC benefits from being unable to insulate itself from outside judgement – every play goes in front of the critics – but it has also sought to test its own understandings by the frequent involvement of outsiders. Indeed, the commissioning of this report has provided one such external check.

The realisation of creativity rests on collaboration

As a successful cultural organisation, the RSC lives and breathes artistic creativity. But every organisation has to adapt, innovate and be creative to some degree. The RSC’s experience shows that creativity can only be realised through collective and collaborative endeavour, and the more that is facilitated – through good communications, a strong common culture, the creation of the right set of attitudes, and so on – the more likely it is that the organisation will be able to experiment, and hence to innovate well, across its whole range of activities.

Organisations need to be efficient and innovative but, in today's social and economic conditions, they also need to be able to respond creatively to external challenges while staying true to their core purpose. This report looks at one organisation's journey towards achieving this.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's story is an example of an organisation in turnaround. Over the past few years it has embarked on an ambitious transformation of its famous Stratford-upon-Avon home. At the same time it has transformed its entire way of working by recovering its foundational principle of 'ensemble' — using this as a creative and ethical principle, and as a management tool — and extending it from the rehearsal room to the organisation as a whole. This change in internal relationships is changing the RSC's relationship with its audiences and the wider public.

This report tells the story of how this was done. It is based on a three-year observation and suggests what other organisations in the cultural sector and beyond might take from the story. It documents the approaches taken and the difficulties encountered. It also focuses on aspects of organisational development that is often ignored: the importance of emotional engagement, humility and openness. As well as a story of change, it is a story of collective ambition: how it is created, shared and brought to fruition.

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