

“The Way We Work”: Integrating Arts and Culture into an Organization

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“It’s not a thing we do; it’s the way we work.”

—In memory of former Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership CEO Rick Goodemann

As a rural artist, I am used to working with small communities; however, working with the Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMHP)—a total of 25 individuals—was a completely new experience. SWMHP sought a resident artist (RA) to work with the staff on integrating arts and cultural strategies throughout the organization to enhance its mission of creating thriving places to live, grow, and work through partnerships with communities. SWMHP saw the value of opening itself up to new ways of working not only to produce better housing, but to be better equipped to engage the rapidly changing and increasingly diverse populations of the communities in its region. After spending one year in the RA position, I would like to offer a few “gold nuggets” (from an artist’s perspective) on what was successful about this initiative to help inform future community development RA programs.

I received the request for proposal (RFP) for the RA position after my theater company, PlaceBase Productions, worked with SWMHP on a project in Milan, MN.¹ There were two things I appreciated about the RFP: 1) It invited applicants to describe their creative *process*, not *product* (not to articulate *what I would do*, but rather *how I would work* with the staff); and 2) it allowed me to do my work in the region where I live and paid a living wage. The RFP introduced the first gold nugget: a willingness **to trust and value the creative process**.

My proposal outlined a similar creative practice to that which I employ when working with communities on theater productions: begin by listening, move on to creating together, and end with a performance/celebration. I was selected for the position and began by hosting a series of story circles, in which I invited the staff to share stories about what was working well and what was challenging about the organization—ranging from communication between departments, technology, staff capacity, file management, marketing, and more. It was here that I recognized the second gold nugget: a willingness **to take risks**. I witnessed the staff becoming more comfortable sharing their ideas as they began to trust me, the creative process, and each other.

¹ A brief presentation about the project “This Land Is Milan” can be found at <https://vimeo.com/271341277>. This site-specific theatrical production explores the concepts of home, immigration, fear, hope, and connection across cultures in a small, rural community that has experienced drastic demographic shifts in the past decade as Micronesian immigrants have joined this largely Norwegian community.

One of the challenges shared was that the staff felt disconnected from each other. This was partly due to the fact that SWMHP has two offices that are over 100 miles apart and serves a region of more than 30 counties, which results in a lot of windshield time. Recognizing these realities, I created a series of podcasts called “Off the Clock,”² with the primary goal of *strengthening connections* between staff members while they were on the road. I recorded one-hour interviews with every staff member following two simple guidelines: 1) meet me somewhere that makes you happy, and 2) we can talk about anything except work. This process gave me direct, one-on-one time with each person (in their homes, favorite bars, walking trails, man caves, shooting ranges, hunting lands, etc.) early on in the process, which built a strong foundation for our work together.

Working with artists was still a new concept for many of the staff members. To be successful at long-term integration of arts and culture into how the organization works, there needed to be inroads for each person to deeply engage with the creative process. I curated an event series called Southwest Minnesota Artist Residency Talks (SMART), which brought 10 different social-practice artists to the office for half-day workshops, in which the entire staff participated. This is where I witnessed a third gold nugget: a willingness to invest time, at all levels of the organization, for staff to participate in the work. This investment of time is a rare and precious gift that many organizations believe they cannot afford; however, the payoff is authentic relationships, meaningful ownership, and ongoing stewardship of creative projects.

After the SMART series, we divided the staff into six working groups that included a mix of departments, leadership levels, demographics, office locations, and newer or long-term staff members. Each group selected one organizational challenge (identified from the story circles) that members would address through a staff-led project (SLP) using their own creative process. These projects included creative solutions for:

- Increasing security on job sites
- Reminding staff to breathe, reflect, and move with intention
- Measuring organizational capacity
- Telling the story of the organization’s work
- Increasing morale
- Launching an artist residency program in a new supportive-housing development

Each group was paired with an “artist consultant,” whose role was to help the group articulate its ideas and to support any technical needs. After three months of working together, we organized a staff retreat where each group shared its SLPs through creative presentations, including videos, interactive surveys, toilet-paper mantras, and a drum circle. Each project employed a creative process—with staff working together across departments—to address challenges that the organization had been facing for many years. To honor these accomplish-

2 Listen to “Off the Clock” podcasts at <https://soundcloud.com/swmhp-offtheclock>.

ments, we celebrated (in the form of a p-ART-y!) to acknowledge the trust, risk-taking, and time each person put into the effort.

My time as an RA with SWMHP produced measurable, tangible outcomes,³ but what I found even more valuable were the *intangible* outcomes—the comfortable looseness of laughter; the uncrossed arms and sparkling eyes; the readiness to participate in silly theater games or songs; the willingness to show up, share, and create together. It’s only through the deep, intentional work of creating a culture within the organization—where we **trust and value the creative process, encourage risk taking**, and allow for a healthy **investment of time**—that these *intangibles* surface and transformation occurs.

The result is not a painting you hang on your wall, but rather a strengthening of your organization’s “creativity muscles,” which allow you to view challenges as opportunities to work with your colleagues on creative solutions. It’s embracing the possibility of a more healthy, efficient, and playful way of working in order to better meet the needs of the residents in the region you serve. It’s in this—the unleashing of our full creative potential—that we move from experiencing arts and culture as “a thing we do” to “the way we work.”

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3 Results from SWMHP Resident Artist pre- and post-survey can be found at https://communitydevelopment.art/sites/default/files/SWMHP_AIR_survey_091918.pdf