



CASE STUDY: CREATIVE SPACES

Spark Centre: doing things differently

July 2013

Suzanne Vesty, Director at Spark Centre of Creative Development in Auckland, talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about how the centre implemented change without jeopardising its core values or compromising on the quality of its services.

1. Background: about Spark Centre of Creative Development

Established in 1996, Spark Centre of Creative Development offers visual arts and art therapy programmes for people living with disabilities, impairment or other diverse needs. Based in St Lukes, Auckland, it's attended by more than 120 adults and children each week and currently offers 12 programmes.

Spark doesn't receive any central government funding and relies entirely on grant applications to funding bodies and donations to carry out its work. I've been with the organisation since 2007 and am responsible for strategic and programme development, and staff management. I also head the Arts Therapy for Stroke team. There is also a board of trustees.

In 2013, Spark Centre's innovative and inclusive programmes, along with its range of programmes, were acknowledged when it received Arts Access Aotearoa's Big 'A' Creative Space Award.

2. What are the signals that told you your creative space needed to do things differently?

From 2007 to 2009, we had significant funding from the Tertiary Education Commission through its ACE Innovation Development Fund. However, this fund was discontinued following a change in government, and ACE funding in all aspects of community education changed significantly.

It became clear to us that with these changing trends in funding, we needed to adapt, change and respond to what was now available.

We also had a growing understanding that strategically, ethically and philosophically, we needed to move towards a more inclusive, integrated and diverse environment.

In an effort to strengthen the resources and positioning of our work, we sought alliances and partnerships with other organisations where there was a natural alignment in client groups and organisation purpose. We also built these alliances because increasingly, funding bodies look favourably on collaborations.

3. How did your creative space change?

We took the risk of expanding and diversifying within a challenging funding environment. We developed whole new areas of work that gave a much broader market base for our service.

At the same time, we didn't compromise the quality or objectives of our work.

Here are some examples of our expansion and diversification:

- In-depth arts therapy programmes for stroke-affected people were developed through an alliance with the Stroke Foundation Northern Region Inc. These were very successful in bringing about rehabilitative outcomes and this year, in November, we are showcasing their work at a major art exhibition at Artstation.
- We developed after-school programmes with children – and now also teens – with Autism Spectrum Difference (ASD).
- We created special sessions in sensory-based art and movement for teenagers with very high needs who are making the transition from Carlson School for Cerebral Palsy into the community.
- We made changes to staff hours and introduced some new roles that used the strengths of individual staff members and contributed to a more holistic, diverse service. For example, we expanded the role of our Health Care Officer/Arts Therapist, Abi Raymond, to include "Student Liaison Officer". This grew our enrolment base significantly and we have moved from 60 artists to more than 120 – a figure that's still growing. Abi maintains personal contact with each of our artists and their organisations.

4. What was the process of responding to a changed environment?

At Spark Centre, we have a "management team". This consists of me as Director, our Finance Administrator, and our Public Relations Fundraising Officer. We work very closely together, keeping each other informed and exploring ideas as a team.

It's my responsibility to make final decisions, but I consult and discuss with my team in most cases.

- We have team meetings with all our arts facilitators, administration and management staff, where we discuss our work directions, content, and any matters concerning our functioning and delivery.
- I meet with individual staff and each person's contribution is valued.
- The artists regularly contribute to our discussions about projects, work content and exhibition opportunities.
- Our board of trustees is kept well-informed. We meet every six weeks and I often meet more regularly with our chairperson.

In this process of change, much thought was given to the philosophy and vision of what we were seeking to bring about, and how we'd go about it.

This process involved:

- consulting and involving all parties involved, including artists, staff and board
- catching what emerged and came towards us
- exploring options and not being conclusive about outcomes
- not letting strategic planning obscure the unknown and unfolding life of something
- having faith that by following this pattern matters would unfold
- seeing transparency and clear communication as crucial
- maintaining clear and regular relationships with all funders by updating them and providing them with interesting and visual reports
- keeping networks/key relationships alive and well
- juggling resources and constantly having to prioritise, adapt and compromise.

As Director, I had to be unafraid of saying “no” sometimes and of making the hard and unpopular decisions.

All of this takes time. Our process occurred over a period of two to three years, and still continues. Changes are constantly occurring and it is an ongoing process.

5. How responsive did you need to be to external pressures, while retaining the core values/core activities of your organisation?

We needed to be extremely responsive. We couldn't be attached to how we thought something should adapt and adjust, or to how we should approach situations.

At the same time, however, we made sure never to compromise our core values, ethics or philosophies. That's because they will maintain and ensure the ongoing life of an organisation. It's the form that changes and adapts, not the spirit or essence of an organisation.

6. How did you manage the way change affected your staff, artists, the board, and yourself as a director? Was there resistance to change? How did you bring people with you?

There has been resistance at times. There have also been some changes that were difficult and painful for people, such as cutting back hours so the organisation could survive a very difficult patch.

I found as Director that it was best to be honest and transparent. I make myself available to speak personally with people if required, and whenever possible to provide or respond positively to their requests. I also demonstrate a willingness to say no, if necessary, making sure I always provide the reasons why a decision is made.

Unfortunately, as creative people know only too well, arts facilitators are used to working in demanding and often relatively insecure employment. Our staff understand that we do everything within our power to provide security and a

good working environment. But Spark Centre is a charity and totally reliant on securing funding. If we don't, we're out of business.

7. What was the impact of the changes you made on your organisation?

Spark Centre has diversified and grown. It has become a more dynamic, innovative and interesting place with more to offer and we are more attractive to funders. Since the global financial turndown we have to work even harder than ever before but thanks to our very competent and experienced management team, we are doing well.

However, you can never be complacent. The funding situation constantly changes and has its ebb and flow. Outcomes are not predictable.

8. How do you measure the impact of changing the way you do things?

- Each programme has a summative evaluation at the end. Special projects have a formative and summative evaluation.
- Children's programmes have evaluations and reports written to parents.
- The Finance Administrator and Public Relations/Funding Officer have systems in place to track all financial/funding outcomes, developments and forecasts. This enables them to carefully monitor our ongoing financial viability and accountability. Any financial or other changes are incorporated in reports that have become a regular part of our management and board meetings.
- At team planning, tutors are consulted and given feedback. Much of our "measuring" is informal, through **observation, and** discussion and conversations with all stakeholders, including care workers.
- Outcomes are self-evident and practice-based.

Suzanne's five tips for creative spaces looking at effective change management:

- Be clear, responsive and transparent when you communicate. Be willing to say "yes" and to say "no".
- Be willing to listen and evaluate before you make a decision.
- Don't be attached to outcomes.
- Keep your faith and believe in the worth of what you do.
- Elicit the strength, wisdom and experience of your team. Let them know you value their contribution and demonstrate that you are willing to act on their contribution.

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