

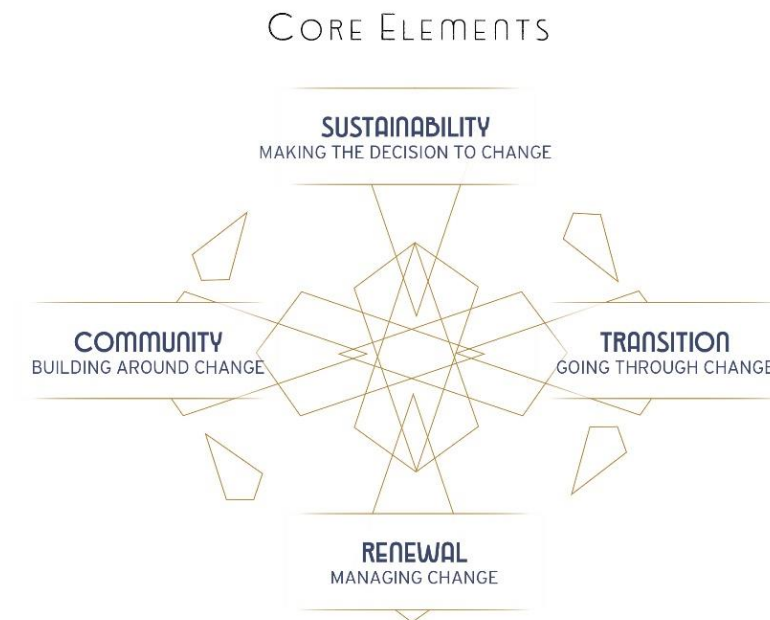
*Agile and Sustainable Organizations in Changing Times*  
Crystal Willie and Alexandra Hatcher, Hatlie Group, Canada

Agile and sustainable organizations are built to be responsive and reflective of their communities and doing so takes intentionality and purpose in how they are organized, managed and lead. Many cultural organizations are in a place in their organizational history where they need to redefine how they work and what they do in order to stay relevant and viable. If they want to thrive, they need to change how they work – specifically this means making changes to their decision-making, systems and culture to make the most effective use of their resources and relationships, in pursuit of their mission and in service to community. Sector-wide, this need for change sometimes looks like older, established institutions struggling and dying as new organizations emerge to fill gaps and to reflect the needs of communities in a way that is difficult for more established organizations that carry with them the baggage of organizational habits and histories. Within organizations, change has a path. This discussion shares what that path can look like, focussing on the elements and systems that make organizations holistically sustainable.

***An Approach to Sustainability***

**Core Elements**

Hatlie Group has developed a model around Four Core Elements, each part of the process of change that supports building and nurturing resilient and agile organizations:



**Sustainability** is about making the decision to change. Organizations that consciously and mindfully make this decision, are starting on the right footing. The steps in this part of the process include:

- clarifying the organization’s purpose and developing clear strategy;
- being mindful in decision making (aligning to strategy);
- working from a holistic perspective; and
- defining the impact you want to achieve.

**Transition** is about the process of going through change. This step provides organizations with the opportunity to objectively examine the work they have been doing, and the way in which they have been doing that work, and determine where efficiencies can be made, and actions can be stopped that are not furthering the agreed upon strategy. This includes:

- examining and reviewing an organization’s practices – governance, programs and services; and
- assessing these against the impact the organization wants to achieve.

**Renewal** focuses on managing change. Once an organization has clarified its vision and strategy, and has examined its practices, and determined where adjustments should be made, the next stage is to support these changes through the systems, supports, and resources that an organization has access to, and uses. These include:

- Systems and Supports include:
  - Policies, practices & training
  - Human Resources including teams, hiring practices and capacity building
  - Communications (internal and external)
- Resources are:
  - Physical Plant (facility requirements or changes needed)
  - Technology (systems, devices and applications)
  - Time (availability of staff / volunteers, bandwidth, sustained attention to stakeholder engagement, lead time on partnerships)
  - Materials and Equipment (inventory, supplies and machinery / devices)
  - Information (research, knowledge and experience base and relevant and reliable data)
  - Money / Funding (cash, assets, funding agreements, revenue potential)

**Community** in its most broad sense, is about building around change. An organization having gone through the other stages of work, will have identified their communities, their stakeholders, and their audiences. This stage allows for the organization to gain a better understanding of their needs, and what type of relationship they have with each, and what type of

relationship they want or need to have in order for the organization to be successful. When examining stakeholders and relationships, there are four categories to consider. These include:

- *Outcomes*: Parties with an interest in what the program can achieve
- *Users & Potential Users*: Individuals & organizations who will or could participate in the program
- *Funders & Authorizing Environment*: Organizations / individuals who provide financial support or can make decisions about the program
- *Partners & Collaborators*: External groups / individuals who have or need a relationship to the program even though they may not be users<sup>1</sup>

### Zones of Execution

Sustainable organizations understand their work happens in different zones of execution. These could also be thought about as levels or areas of management, leadership and program delivery. The zones are interconnected and have distinctive practices and approaches.



Sustainable organizations look at their operations holistically – this means that they understand the relationships between the different activities that go into governing, managing and operating an organization and are able to apply their strategy and values to decision making across all zones:

- *Community*: Who you work for. This is who you serve—your community or communities; your users, first and foremost; your funders; and your and partners.

---

<sup>1</sup> John M. Bryson, *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004): 35.

- *Operations*: How you do your work. This includes your policy and procedural framework, your standards of practice, your management techniques and processes.
- *Activities*: What work you do. This is your programs, projects, products and events offering.
- *People*: Who does the work. This includes healthy and creative workplaces, leadership, strong teams and engaged individuals – board, staff and volunteers.
- *Strategy*: Why you do your work. This guides your organizations through your strategic direction – defining where you are going and why – and the change you want to make.

Sustainable organizations have an understanding of strategic thinking that allows them to work in each of these zones simultaneously – because they are seeing their work from different perspectives. These organizations may shift where they place their focus and energy from time-to-time but maintain an understanding of the holistic relationship between each of the zones.

### **Facets of Sustainability**

In 2013 the Alberta Museums Association (AMA) published the *Sustainability Working Group Recommendations Report*<sup>2</sup> which included a series of facets of sustainability for museums, heritage organizations, and cultural institutions. This work came to form the foundation of discussions on sustainability in Alberta’s museum sector and has had direct impact on the community through the AMA’s Grants Program, the Recognized Museum Program, and the themes and sessions at their annual conferences. The research that led to the AMA’s report has also influenced the sustainability model that the Hatlie Group now uses in its work.

Sustainability has five facets: culture, health and wellbeing, environment, financial, and social. As we’ve worked with these facets we have further defined and refined the model and placed it in context with other elements in nonprofit organizations including governance, program and service design, and a solid understanding of operational realities and the systems and structures that support success.

The individual facets cannot be considered separately, the model has to be considered from a holistic view – if one facet is overlooked in the organization’s actions or strategy, then the entire model falls apart. This holistic approach supports resiliency and agility and provides the opportunity to discuss impacts in all areas of the organization’s work, including its relationships, activities, and communication.

---

<sup>2</sup> Full report can be found at Alberta Museums Association, *Sustainability Working Group: Recommendations Report*, n.d. [https://www.museums.ab.ca/media/34750/museumsswg\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.museums.ab.ca/media/34750/museumsswg_report_final.pdf)

## *Facets of Sustainability*

### **Culture**

Culture is the way in which organizations provide opportunities to the access, engage, and participate in the appreciation, exploration and expression of culture. For arts, heritage, and culture organizations, this is their reason for being. It is about how story, objects, art, creativity, ceremony, and education are offered to the community, and how we as organizations engage with our communities to build meaning.

### **Health and Wellness**

Health is defined as the absence of disease, and wellness is the maintaining and balance of all aspects of being human. To simplify wellness, we have broken it down to five parts – social, physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. When examining health and wellness in the context of sustainability we explore it from a holistic, nested perspective: from the position of the individual (i.e. staff members), the organization (i.e. organizational culture and its behaviours and practices), community (i.e. geographic, like practice, like interest etc.), and society (i.e. the role of the organization in the larger context).

### **Environment**

Often when discussing ‘sustainability,’ environment is the first word that comes to mind. When considering the environment within a holistic perspective of sustainability, it is still about making intentional decisions for the long-term viability of the world that surrounds us including flora, fauna, and our built environment. This model also takes into consideration the connections of one thing to everything else, and views sustainability holistically, as a large ecosystem.

### **Financial**

Financial sustainability is concerned with balancing the impact of an organization’s mission and relevance with the revenue generated, and the potential for revenue in order to continue the work of the organization. It is about considering the monetary bottom line and building a revenue model, but also about linking that financial bottom line to the other bottom lines a nonprofit has to manage, including mission, stakeholder relationships, and customer expectations.

### **Social**

Social sustainability can be defined as supporting, contributing to, and addressing identified community priorities or issues, with the community, with the intention of contributing to positive social change. Again, it is inextricably linked to the other facets

and needs to be taken into consideration from a nested approach, involving the individual, community and society as a whole.

## **Tools and Resources**

When examining how an organization can be sustainable for the long-term, we have developed and adapted a number of tools and resources that support this work. The tools are not intended to be used in a linear form (though they can be), nor is any one element intended to be considered independent from another. Each tool has a role to play in the overall sustainability of the organization and needs to be considered in the realm of the entire organization.

The process of working towards sustainability is neither quick, nor easy.

An organization first needs to identify its stakeholders, users, audiences, and communities, understanding who the organization serves, who uses its programs and services or attends performances, and the communities in which it plays a role.

Developing a Strategic Framework, which includes Values, Vision and Mission, and a series of Impact Statements which define the changes that will take place because of the organization's work, provides the guideposts necessary for strategic decision making.

Building a Business Plan that is focused on the customer (the identified users), includes a Unique Value Proposition to differentiate the organization, identifies revenue streams and resources that may have previously been underexploited, and examines all activities and how they support the vision, mission and impact you want to achieve will provide a strong foundation for annual planning and assessment tools.

Implementing a Governance Model that is based in transparency, shared leadership, and is policy focused assists in reliable decision making.

This model of sustainability is supported by a truly team-based Human Resources Structure. The characteristics of a team-based structure have been defined as Trust, Common Purpose, Shared Consciousness, and Empowered Execution.<sup>3</sup> Members need to trust each other in order for the team-based approach to be successful. Articulating a common purpose that everyone supports, the shared vision, is important for understanding the “end goal” that everyone is working towards.

---

<sup>3</sup> Stanley McChrystal et al., *Team of teams : new rules of engagement for a complex world*. (New York, New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015).

Shared Consciousness is about having a shared understanding of the purpose and the issues faced by the team, and organization, and ensuring alignment in their future direction. Ensuring that there is shared access provides all team members with the information necessary to make good decisions. Ongoing education and training supports building capacity and general understanding among not only the team, but throughout the organization.

Empowered Execution is a way of working that starts by communicating with transparency. This includes providing unobstructed, up-to-date views of the rest of the organization as well as access to information and open information sharing. Decentralized decision-making is also an element of Empowered Execution, which comes with high accountability.

Rather than succumbing to traditional hierarchical structures and their trappings such as annual performance reviews, developing Accountability Agreements in alignment with Annual Work Plans allow for individuals to work with their teams and those that they report to, to clearly articulate their accountability, what outcomes they are responsible for, and how they are contributing to success of the organization.

This process is then connected to outcome-based planning and assessment, doing the right things in service to your organization’s identified users, audiences, and communities.



## Case Studies

Change management theory teaches us that an organization requires a sense of urgency or crisis to launch the process of change.<sup>4</sup> The following three case studies focus on established cultural organizations that each experienced a significant catalyst prior to entering into the discussion around sustainability and how their organization could adjust to more sustainable practices. Whether faced with the possibility of a new facility, a financial crisis, or a crisis of purpose, these arts and culture organizations had the right initial condition in place for successful change, and each organization made an intentional, mindful decision to enter into the process, and begin to consciously explore, and assess, their decisions and actions, their relevance, who they were serving and defining their impact, all through the lens of sustainability.

### Arts Commons Calgary, Alberta



<b>Type of Organization:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large Performing Arts Centre</li> </ul>
<b>Staffing:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 61 full-time and 150 part-time employees</li> </ul>
<b>Size:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 600,000 sq. ft. (55,742 m<sup>2</sup>)</li> </ul>
<b>Facilities:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 Theatres, 1 Black Box, and 1 Concert Hall</li> </ul>
<b>Programming:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 external Resident Companies + <i>Arts Commons Presents</i> programming</li> </ul>

Over the course of a year, the Arts Commons Board and staff defined their impact using the five Facets of Sustainability as their guide. They examined their work from an individual, organization, and community perspective and took their current organizational culture and values into consideration. Building on the strong foundation that existed, they wanted to be more intentional with their decision making. Since the establishment of the Impact Statements, the organization has started to adjust their internal systems and structures in order to more fully support the meaning they want to have in the community.

### *Arts Commons Impact Statements*

#### **Cultural**

- Our values are integral to all we do.

<sup>4</sup> John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).



**Health and Wellbeing**

- Healthy people, organization, and community are encouraged by working together holistically for wellbeing.

**Environmental**

- Deliberate and intentional choices are made to minimize our environmental impact.

**Financial**

- A strong, effective, and efficient organization is cultivated by empowering and investing in our people, programs and facility, and our community.

**Social Responsibility**

- Conversations and connections are fostered and promoted through the collective leveraging of our resources and the arts, as a tool for society to experience, discover, and broaden understanding.

On April 3, 2020, Arts Commons announced that it would be keeping all salaried employees fully employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the press release announcing this commitment they cited the importance of supporting the mental wellbeing of their staff as one of the reasons for making this decision,<sup>5</sup> a direct action in alignment with the organization’s Health and Wellbeing Impact Statement.

**Alberta Aviation Museum**

*Edmonton, Alberta*



<b>Type of Organization:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mid-sized Museum</li> </ul>
<b>Staffing:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 full-time and 1 part-time employees</li> </ul>
<b>Size:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approx. 80,000 sq.ft. (7,500 m2)</li> </ul>
<b>Facilities:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection of more than 20 full aircraft on display</li> </ul>
<b>Programming:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education programs, public programs, exhibitions, collections and research</li> <li>• 8 partners on site (as tenants)</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> Arts Commons, *Arts Commons Supports its Employees through COVID-19 Pandemic*, April 3, 2020. <https://artscommons.ca/who-we-are/press-releases-media-advisories/2020/arts-commons-supports-its-employees-through-covid-19-pandemic/>

The Alberta Aviation Museum (AAM) faced a serious financial crisis in the fall 2018. The Board of Directors went to Edmonton’s City Council and informed them that the organization was in a position where if additional funding was not made available, that they would have to close their doors. City Council agreed to provide the additional funding, with the requirement that the organization complete a process to ensure sustainability as this one-time emergency funding would not be made available in the future.

Over the course of a year, the museum worked with Hatlie Group to develop a strategic framework, and conduct a program and services audit, a governance practice review and an operations review. Examining its relevance through a sustainability lens, and making changes to its governance practices, its organizational structure, and developing a business model that is user and stakeholder focused has changed its financial position as well as its success within their communities.

### ***Alberta Aviation Museum Sustainability Goals***

#### *Health and Wellbeing*

Predictability, stability, and accountability in decision making, expectations, and motivation is supported by our clearly defined vision.

#### *Culture*

Inclusive and diverse relationships are the foundation of our visitor-focused programs and services.

#### *Social Responsibility*

Our programs, services, events, and relationships foster an awareness of community issues and contribute to local positive change.

#### *Environment*

Intentional decisions minimize our environmental footprint, individually and organizationally, and we work with our assets to increase energy efficiency and reduce waste.

#### *Financial*

A balance of revenue and relevance contributes to our long-term stability.

**Corps Bara Dance Company**  
 Calgary, Alberta



<b>Type of Organization:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small Dance Company</li> </ul>
<b>Staffing:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 contracted part-time employees</li> <li>• Contracted Dancers, Choreographers etc. as required</li> </ul>
<b>Size:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A (no home venue or theatre)</li> </ul>
<b>Facilities:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
<b>Programming:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 scheduled performances per year</li> </ul>

Corps Bara was established in 2000 and over the past nineteen years has transformed and changed as a dance company based in a spiritual practice. As it entered into its twentieth year, the Board of Directors and the leadership of its contracted Artistic Director made the decision to clarify its purpose: who they are, who do they want to be, and for whom. By entering into a strategy development process and ensuring sustainability was a part of the conversation, Corps Bara has been able to define its impact for those that it serves directly: the dancers, its audiences, and its current and potential partners.

***Corps Bara Strategic Framework***

**Vision:**

We are a thriving contemporary dance company that explores life’s meaningful questions.

**Mission:**

We develop and invest in artists, facilitating an expansive, holistic dance practice to create and present work which engages our diverse audiences.

**Impact Goals:**

- Our dancers have stability.
- Our dancers are challenged.
- Our audiences are our champions.
- Our partner and collaborator relationships are mutually beneficial.
- Our partner and collaborator relationships are stable and ongoing.
- The spiritual lives of our dancers, audiences, and partners are enriched.

Recently, when discussing the use of the organization’s Strategic Framework over the past several months during the pandemic crisis, and its helpfulness in providing direction, Artistic Director Deanna Witwer stated,

In a time when it would be tempting to roll over in uncertainty and put everything on hold, Corps Bara’s impact statements and mission have held us accountable to our purpose, while our vision has provided a guiding ethos within which to imagine our efforts. The question became, ‘how can we develop and invest in artists in the time of COVID-19 in ways that offer them and our collaborators something stable and beneficial, while connecting with our audiences in ways that are spiritually enriching.’

Out of this question came a virtual research project on a theme of solitude, a social media thread using imagery and reflection to publicly process grief and loss, and an upcoming pop-up performance project exploring the aesthetics of peace.”

## **Conclusion**

Today arts and culture organizations navigate similar forces to what was experienced in the 1920s and these can be the same catapulting forces for creativity, and a multiplier of access and promotion for artists and cultural creatives. But in the cultural sector, organizations are once again struggling with sustainability, being viable for the long term, and not surprisingly being relevant and reflective of the communities they serve. At Hatlie Group, we suggest that this is because many of the organizations that support the arts were established in a different time. And again, the old structures and systems find themselves in conflict with or inadequate to deal with what is happening in the communities they serve. Change has always been there, but this time, it is more rapid and extreme. Community relationships, revenue models, programming approaches, communication and marketing methods, human resources systems and governance practices were all created to work in communities that do not look or act like our communities today.

Being sustainable in unpredictable and tumultuous times is about creating organizations that can bend, respond and move quickly. This is as much about knowing your environment and having strong relationships as it is about being well managed in the traditional sense of doing things correctly or efficiently. Competence, experience and a broad knowledge base matter because they are what allow organizations to make good decision and serve their audiences, customers, users, and communities well when nothing around them is going according to plan and the training or procedures manual do not match with the reality, or become redundant because of circumstances such as the COVID-19 global pandemic. In these environments where plans date quickly strategy based on vision, values and well articulated outcomes keep organizations making the best use of their resources and energy.

***Acknowledgements:***



Alexandra would like to thank the Alberta Museums Association for funding provided through the Professional Development Grants Program which contributed to her participation in the L’AiR Arts Residency.



Crystal thanks the Edmonton Heritage Council for supporting her participation in the L’AiR Arts Residency through the Heritage Community Investment Program.