

Perchance to Dream



Dance Ireland Conference
A Space to Envision our Collective Future

08-09 December 2016

FOCUS GROUP TWO – BUILDING STRONG NETWORKS

Facilitated by Madeline Boughton

The second focus group of Dance Ireland's *Perchance to Dream* conference was entitled Building Strong Networks, facilitated by Madeline Boughton. Madeline emphasised from the start that the focus of the session would be on building strong networks – investing wisely in a few key networks of resources and people – rather than building many networks. In order to accomplish this, the session took three primary questions as its focus:

What are the participants' needs in their networks?

What types of networks are there, especially formal versus informal?

What toolbox of skills/resources does one need to build and, most importantly, to maintain those networks?

To set the stage for small group work on the above questions, we began by briefly brainstorming some of the characteristics of a good strong network. They were described as follows:

- * Trust and respect – for each other and the goals you share – should be present within a strong network.
- * There should be a sense of mutuality, of a shared agenda/value system.
- * Equality is often a sign of a productive network – if not in the network's structure, then in members' access to its resources.
- * Members should feel able to communicate, and the network should encourage continued dialogue.
- * The potential to create a tipping point; enough power to get the right people in place saying the right things, is often essential to a network's efficacy.
- * By extension, sometimes it is about scale/capacity, or having a network that is the right size to achieve its' aims.
- * It should fulfill its participants' needs and be able to dynamically adjust to new needs that arise.
- * Making work and collaborating can be exhausting, so sometimes having a network that can go quiet for a while but still be available for future investment is really valuable.
- * A network that supports other overlapping networks and allows members to move freely through several groups is often stronger than an isolated network.
- * A real sense of community, a platform for gaining visibility and connectivity, is perhaps the most important aspect of a good network.

Madeline then said a few words to synthesise the discussion. She left us with the following working definition of a network: 'A network is an extended group of people with similar interests or concerns who interact and remain in informal contact for mutual assistance and support. It's not just about what you get out but also what you put in.' Based on this definition, and with our previous discussions in mind, we then broke into small groups and reflected on potential answers to the three questions outlined at the beginning of the session. Here are some of the potential answers we arrived at:

What are the participants' needs in their networks?

- * Opportunities to increase one's visibility, or the visibility of a piece of work or group
- * Spaces or points of contact between dancers and other collaborators in the sector – events, festivals, and shared studio space, etc.
- * Networks for fundraising, especially for the purposes of linking up funding sources and applicants, as well as people who might successfully collaborate on grant application
- * Points of access to and knowledge about related networks outside the dance sector
- * Venue partnerships with funding organisations and institutions to facilitate easier collaboration on shows
- * Pleasure and fun – a means through which to do what you enjoy doing more effectively
- * Both logistic and more immaterial/collaborative forms of support
- * Productive critical feedback and a critical community

What types of networks are there, especially formal versus informal?

- * The biggest distinction drawn was between formal and informal networks. Several people observed that formal networks tend to function more like named organisations, whereas informal networks, though no less valuable, are more diffuse. Often, the work one does impacts the types of networks they might feel they have access to. For instance, freelancers described how they overwhelmingly felt they existed almost exclusively in informal networks.
- * A distinction was also drawn between networks that support paid versus unpaid opportunities. Some networks provide members with non-monetary value (social connections, experience, access to collaborators, etc.) while others might provide members with access to paid work.
- * Crucially, there are also familiar networks and unfamiliar networks, and sometimes it is colliding with people outside your comfort zone, or outside the network you normally work in, that can produce the most fruitful relationships.
- * Not all networks are perfectly egalitarian, and sometimes hierarchy can serve a valuable purpose. A network could be collaborative or expertise-based, it could be composed of peers or a system of mentorship.
- * Some networks are hard – well-established, maybe institutionally embedded – while others are soft – more ephemeral, informal, maybe the result of a one-off session like this focus group. It is a valuable skill to be able to navigate and recognize the benefits in both types of networks.
- * Some networks feel closed, and 'networking' as a word doesn't always have positive connotations. It is a key skill to be able to distinguish between gains and losses in choosing where to invest your energy across networks so that your valuable time and resources aren't wasted on a network that isn't giving back.

What toolbox of skills/resources does one need to build and, most importantly, to maintain those networks?

- * Seek mutual acquaintances or advocates in a network in which you want to be more involved. Finding someone to champion your work can give you a crucial platform.
- * Recognise your skills and the skills of others and cater tasks to people's strengths. Recognise your own limitations when it comes to multi-tasking and/or taking on new skills.
- * Step outside your comfort zone and approach people and networks you wouldn't normally encounter.
- * Because so many people work across multiple roles, a key skill to have as one moves through networks is to be able to identify one's position in relation to others in the network and make it clear from the outset what your limitations are.
- * Prioritise where to place your energy, especially if you are working across several networks or one vast network.
- * Identify which network ecology you want to occupy. Identify which part of the network landscape works for you and is also a place where your skills are valued and needed.

Finally, we returned to the large group and shared our discussion, amassing a list of key skills for sustaining networks, as well as potential barriers one might encounter in the process:

TOOLKIT SYNOPSIS:

- * Find your champion, find your way into the network
- * Identify common values
- * Identify what you have to offer collaboratively
- * Don't ignore the value of soft networks
- * Prioritise and make decisions
- * Know when to let go of a network
- * Know the limits of your expertise
- * Be very clear about what you need/want

POTENTIAL BARRIERS:

- * Gatekeepers might make accessing a network difficult
- * Loss of trust in a network or your collaborators
- * Having too many roles
- * Losing time searching for information or struggling to develop new skills (lack of central resources)
- * Time is always finite, and networking isn't always prioritized
- * You might end up in the wrong network
- * Money, like time, remains a limiting factor that is often priority number one in making one's work sustainable

This document was written by and prepared for Dance Ireland by Natalie Morningstar, PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, and visiting scholar at the Department of Sociology at Trinity College Dublin, based upon her participation in and observation of the focus group on the day.

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