



# Dissolution – Change the Stigma to Change the Industry

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March 31, 2015.

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## DISSOLUTION - CHANGE THE STIGMA TO CHANGE THE INDUSTRY

The financial struggles encountered by arts organization over the past few decades have changed the dialog in the arts management field. Although most of the statistics and information available are from the United States, it is not a drastic leap to assume that much of the same is happening in Canada today. In the US, 40% of arts organizations have disappeared over the past 20 years. Yet for every institution that remained, 2.6 new institutions emerged. (Smith, We should allow failing arts organizations to die., 2014) The cause of this decline is vehemently debated across academic circles and the blogosphere however, that is not to focus of this paper. Rather, this paper will argue that arts managers must change their perception of their organizations. Arts managers must perceive their organizations as transitory institutions that are in place to fulfill a certain specific cause and/or need. It is only in this manner that arts management professionals will be able to accept dissolution as a standard practice in the industry and actively seek out the skills and competencies necessary to wind down an organization in an effective and efficient manner. Only by taking the long-term perspective and weeding out the failing, can the overall health of the industry be improved.

This paper will outline some of the idiosyncrasies in the arts industry, theories and recent arguments for and against standardized dissolution of arts organizations. Furthermore, this paper will outline some of the more practical roles that key stakeholders can play as well as some of the activities that need to take place once the decision to close has been made.

## THE STATUS OF THE ARTS INDUSTRY

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### WHAT IS BEING DONE TODAY?

To effectively evaluate why tomorrow's struggling organizations must be dissolved, it is imperative that the reasoning behind the industry's motivations for keeping these same organizations alive is well understood. The standard arguments for saving arts organizations center around three topics. Organizations are being saved for

the art, for the audience or the artists. (Smith, We should allow failing arts organizations to die., 2014) Numerous trends have indicated that consumers are moving towards other mediums to consume their art. Artists are, for the most part, making the bulk of their income from other sources that are used to make ends meet while they pursue their passion. Finally, most of the art created today is created outside of traditional art institutions. If the institutions are not being saved for their art, their artists or the audience, what's left? Smith argues that arts institutions are being saved for the administrators that run them and that this forms the core of the problem facing the arts as an industry. Without a focus on creating art, delivering art or sustaining the artist, most institutions move towards sustaining themselves indefinitely.

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#### CHANGING THE PERSPECTIVE

Only by moving towards facilitating the demise of the irrelevant are resources freed up for the new, the vibrant and the sustainable organizations. This can only be done by changing the perspective from a focus on sustaining the weak to one of driving the strong. An extreme example of this would be Cirque Du Soleil, which was founded by a government grants but was later transitioned into a for-profit powerhouse. This is not to argue that all arts organizations must become for-profit but rather that organizations should gain their footing and eventually become self-sustaining. Discovering and funding these types of organizations is no small feat; however, by removing the noise associated with the failing not-for-profits, it will become easier to select those that have the potential to succeed over the long-term. The arts industry may be in turmoil but is far from being an exception. Other industries including newspapers and music have also suffered at some point in their existence and it was only through radical and necessary change that they regained their prominence.

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#### FAILING AND HOW TO AVOID IT

From the perspective of Smith, a failing organization is one that is not meeting the needs of its constituents: the art, the artist or the community. Smith argues that

there are three options available when considering possible models for oversight in the arts sector.

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### INSTITUTIONS

One option is to allow organizations that provide funding, both public and private, to broaden their mandate and look at industries in a more holistic manner. She believes that the way to make these organizations better at discerning which organizations to fund is to allow them to experiment with different models and allow for micro-failures. Interestingly, this perspective would imply that the funding institutions become comfortable with failure and possibly take on responsibility for their selections – a perspective that is highly improbable.

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### INDIVIDUALS

Through an objective rating mechanism, a third party would be able to evaluate the merits of an arts organization by either buying into an arts stock market or by allowing small organizations to provide metrics on areas beyond just financial performance, but rather actual impact. This perspective is inherently attempting to wedge the arts sector into a strictly commercial model that would be less than likely to succeed.

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### GOVERNMENT

This third category goes beyond just the grant-making bodies but turns towards tax collection agencies to expand their criteria and/or appeals to the government to build an arts regulatory body that would look at the entire arts sector as a whole and decide on a broad mandate.

Regardless of the model, what is being done today is not working. Although neither of the models proposed are a silver-bullet, some combination of these must be considered to move this industry forward. In either case, choices are being made this very moment. The decision regarding which organization lives and which dies is being determined by the funding agencies. Even though the metrics surrounding how to

evaluate these organizations is still not clearly defined, this area needs to be addressed. To be clear, there are groups that are using a hybrid of these models already and Smith brings forth The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and The San Francisco Foundation. Both of these organizations are applying several elements of these concepts with great success.

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## ARGUMENTS AGAINST CHANGE

With the perspective described, it would be prudent to also review and analyze two of the more common arguments for retaining the status quo.

### ARTS ORGANIZATIONS ARE DIFFERENT

This argument came up repeatedly throughout various articles, blogs and essays. The main focus of this argument is the arts sector is extremely challenging and unique and therefore requires special considerations. Although true at a lower level, this argument is fundamentally flawed as each and every industry has specific elements and problems that make it unique. Throwing away all of the strategies and lessons collected by other industries simply because they were not discovered or created by arts management field is an irrational stance. Smith agrees and suggests that arts management professionals should look at other industries that have faced rapid change and drastic overhauls in similarly short periods of time. The arts management field must remain open to suggestions and be willing to take calculated risks.

### LEAVE US ALONE

Some groups have made the argument that struggling organizations are in fact disappearing and that nothing needs to be done. While that is true based on the statistics, the bottom line is that too few are closing down fast enough. Additionally, in their desperate attempt to stay alive, they are dragging other good organizations down with them. The tendency across North America has been to keep these organizations on life-support and hope that the tide turns. This is not a feasible solution.

Karina Magu-Ward believes that arts organization should not be thought of as colossal organizations that are either thriving or failing but rather complex systems that should not be meddled with. Fundamentally, this argument holds true if the organizations discussed were surviving on their own merit. However, if an organization is being supported by the public purse with no interest in improving or becoming sustainable, its demise should be accelerated. There are numerous large organizations (for profit and not) that would be better equipped to utilize funds in a way that is justifiable economically, socially and artistically over the long term.

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### THE ARTS ORGANIZATION LIFECYCLE

When considering the broader environment from the perspective of an arts organization, it can easily be determined that an organization goes through three typical phases: the organization is founded, it reaches a degree of inertia and it must then change or die. At a fundamental level, most large organizations, for profit or not, go through these various stages. (Ragsdale, Change in the arts sector. Can we speed it up or must we wait it out?, 2014)

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#### FOUNDATION

In the case of not-for-profits, these organizations are founded to meet a need while aggregating resources and capitalizing on many of the tax and other saving opportunities offered to organizations that are both legitimate and materially beneficial. (Ragsdale, Change in the arts sector. Can we speed it up or must we wait it out?, 2014)

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#### INERTIA

Once these organizations are established and with the prominence of grants from government agencies and funders, funding requirements started to gain in importance. Interestingly, these requirements put forth criteria that looked at minimums: minimum number of staff, minimum number of years in existence, minimum managerial staff, etc. The importance of having stability and accountability outweighed the purpose of what the organization was set to do in the first place. (Ragsdale, Change

in the arts sector. Can we speed it up or must we wait it out?, 2014) It became commonplace that the oldest and most stable organizations captured the bulk of the funding. What remained in the end are modern arts organizations as we know them today. Those old, stable and reliable organizations began to be more risk averse for fear of losing their funding. The focus shifted towards retaining a stable and reliable structure and the only way to achieve this was to resist change. Add to this the myriad of other aspects that further degrade performance including sunk costs, political alliances, and the tendency for precedents to become norms and what you get are the highly dysfunctional, poor performing organizations that are seen today. (Ragsdale, Change in the arts sector. Can we speed it up or must we wait it out?, 2014) So how do they persist for so long? Well, just as Smith concluded earlier, the administrative staff keeps the organizations afloat in order to earn a living and never taking the risks associated with the drastic changes required to materially affect the organization's long-term viability.

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#### CHANGE

There are fundamentally three different ways in which change can take place within any organization. (Ragsdale, Change in the arts sector. Can we speed it up or must we wait it out?, 2014) This includes rational adaptation which is essentially a calculated maneuver made by the organization to adopt changes they deem to be appropriate or necessary. The second type of change refers to random changes that typically occur at the population level rather than at the level of the individual organization. This is the method that is seen most commonly today, where specific types of organizations become irrelevant around the same time. They are then replaced by others with entirely different traits. The third and final type of change centres around population ecology - a micro level change where one organization is replaced by another. These three types of changes can be seen with local organizations on a day-to-day basis however, the organizations supported by government and private funding tend to change only when random shifts based on



taste and popularity deems them irrelevant. (Ragsdale, Change in the arts sector. Can we speed it up or must we wait it out?, 2014)

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#### RELUCTANCE OR INABILITY TO ACCEPT CHANGE

A great example of this problem can be seen with symphonies, orchestras and operas (Syracuse Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Kitchener Waterloo Orchestra, London Orchestra and Hamilton Orchestra) which have all suffered financial strains and in a few cases even closed. These organizations were created for a purpose and in recent times, their degree of relevance has diminished to a point where their large-scale operations are no longer sustainable. (Ragsdale, Letting go of the lifestyle to which some arts groups have become accustomed, 2011) This is hard to swallow for many stakeholders and for many organizations in the arts sector. Their primary response is to deny reality and continue budgeting and spending in a manner typical of the past. In addition to this, many organizations simply miss the signs because their culture and prior success allow them to operate without noticing the small changes at first. It is as difficult for an arts organization as it is for a for-profit multi-national to recognize a change in its marketplace, especially at a time when they are the market leaders. (Ragsdale, Letting go of the lifestyle to which some arts groups have become accustomed, 2011)

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#### PERMANENTLY FAILING ORGANIZATIONS

With this understanding of change, or the lack of it, what remains in the industry are perpetually failing organizations that are too old and too large to fail. Because the industry has equated an institution's age and size with success, the entire sector has looked at new models and ideas through this narrow perspective which is adversely affecting the industry itself. (Ragsdale, Are we a sector defined by our permanently failing organizations?, 2012) It is foreseeable that by moving away from these models of success, new ideas may be formed and stronger more applicable organizational models could be created. Furthermore, by encouraging these large and old

organizations to fail, the perspectives of those in the arts sector may change and work to redefine what success means.

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### AN UNSUSTAINABLE MODEL

So what does this all mean? Looking back at the arts sector as an industry, it very quickly becomes obvious that the model put forth is unsustainable, and having organizations compete for resources without clear-cut methods and practices is not an effective means to a successful end. It is now commonplace to have arts organizations compete locally for arts patrons in a very narrow band of the upper-middle class, a few government agencies and an even smaller number of private foundations and corporations. (Ragsdale, Supply and Demand Redux: Rocco's Comment and the Elephant in the Room, 2011) The discussion about letting 1000 flowers bloom, while probably applicable at the art piece level, is not applicable at the art organization level. What has resulted is an industry that is sourcing funds based on continual growth, relative size and growing programs - essentially a pending disaster.

*"We appear to have neither the mechanism nor the will to effectively downsize the sector and thus we have created a rivalrous environment. And how have arts groups responded? Well, many have grown their institutions, making ever-increasing investments in marketing, development, high profile leaders, and buildings in order to be winners in the desperate fight for prestige, press, audiences, trustees, and donors." (Ragsdale, overstocked arts pond: fish too big & fish too many, 2011)*

The sad truth is that while these arts sector organizations have grown, they have done so without finding proper funding. Rather, they take on unmanageable debt or they raid their endowments. The result is financially unstable institutions that require increasingly large and complex programs to keep them afloat. This in turn has

increased the propensity for organizations to run deficits year upon year and yet it appears that the underlying problem, the unsustainable model, is not being addressed.

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#### SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF THE ARTS

Several prominent authors in the arts have come forward to argue and defend Rocco Landesman (chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts) who brought up several economic theories as they pertain to the arts. (Lehrman, 2012) Landesman's argument is that there is currently an oversupply of arts and a steady (if not decreasing) demand for the arts. Landesman makes the assertion that supply can be controlled while demand cannot. This statement created a tremendous amount of controversy regarding how arts are to be looked at and classified from an economic policy point of view. While it is discerning that leading arts figures believe that existing organizations do not have the capability to drive growth in their industry, the supply and demand argument is nevertheless valid. Economics should not form the foundation for the need for arts and culture however, those that argue that it has no merit at all are wrong when such a large percentage of arts foundations rely on public funds. Landesman rightly took a lot of heat for his assertions on the ability for the industry to increase demand, but if the industry hopes to increase demand, the quality of what is offered will need to improve and the only way to do that is to increase the criteria for funding.

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#### RADICAL TRANSFORMATION VS. DISSOLUTION

Additionally, too many authors make too large a distinction between radical transformation and dissolution. By restructuring, bringing in new management and modifying the organization's mandate, it is clear that a fresh perspective and a new organization has emerged. By focusing the discussions on the pros and cons of each alternative the main issues regarding how and when are not being addressed.

*"If there is an institution that is failing, but we can use its infrastructure (its building, its assets, its cashflow, its artistic capital, its influence in the*

*community, its institutional knowledge) to create something new and more relevant, all the better, and that absolutely deserves an opportunity to compete for the resources and attention of the community and of institutional funders.” (Smith, The Debate Around Life and Death in the Arts, 2014)*

Even though it is painful to see organizations fail, the argument that new organizations will not step in to fill the unfulfilled needs the failed organization left behind is flawed. (Smith, The Debate Around Life and Death in the Arts, 2014) This is in fact the main point of allowing organizations to fail as it offers other more successful organizations avenues to pursue and grow. Recognizing areas where other have failed and how these areas can be improved forms the foundation of any real industry.

*“If a commercial firm experiences losses year after year—unless it can successfully develop a new market for its product, or change its product to better serve existing markets, or restructure its business to reduce expenses, or find economies of scale through expansion or merger, or achieve revenues over expenses via other strategies—it will most likely shut down. Or it might be taken over by others who believe they can do a better job of running it. If an entire industry is in decline and there is insufficient demand for the current suppliers to cover their costs then one would expect to see firms exit the industry until equilibrium is achieved. There are exceptions— but generally speaking, this is what one would expect because commercial firms exist to make profits.”*  
*(Ragsdale, Supply and Demand Redux: Rocco’s Comment and the Elephant in the Room, 2011)*

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Now that the core problem related to the need for winding down struggling arts organizations is understood, consideration will be given to what can be done about it.

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### SIMPLY DISSOLVING ORGANIZATIONS IS NOT THE SOLUTION

In a recent interview, Richard Evans argues that organizations must evolve in order to remain relevant and that not all organizations need to be dissolved the very moment they start to underperform. (Mangu-Ward, 2014) He brings forth an argument related to the complexity of the system (the arts industry) and that linear solutions such as the one proposed are not suitable for complex systems such as the cultural arts sector. The core of the argument is that a sophisticated approach is required and that simply shuttering in some organizations will not improve the status of the industry as a whole. What is required is a change in perspective towards failure. Evans further advocates that failure must be embraced in a way that is very similar to Tina Rasmussen's recent talk at Schulich (Rasmussen, 2015). She advocated a methodology where one pushes the envelope and expects a certain percentage of initiatives to fail. Although Tina's argument focuses on art, Evans believes that the same logic should also apply to the rise and fall of arts organizations. In essence, what is being offered is a supply and demand model where the obsolete and irrelevant fail and the new and mainstream are accepted. The key to this argument is that arts organizations would need to experiment and attempt to stay ahead of the curve.

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### FOCUS ON EMPLOYEE LEADERSHIP, DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

In typical corporate environments, the good founders are usually the first to see the problems and the first to attempt to remedy situations. Steve Jobs, Howard Schultz, and Michael Dell are three examples of founders that have come back to save their organizations from the brink. In all three cases the founders were removed from the day-to-day operations voluntarily or non-voluntarily, but all three came back to take drastic measures. This is partially due to selection bias in the media (it is not common to hear about the founders that failed), and partially due to the fact that these

particular founders had a standardized way of measuring success – financial performance. The financial performance element is where not-for-profit (arts or not) and the for-profit organizations differ most. Arts organizations lack the methodology, infrastructure and the skill sets necessary to measure, recognize and enact broad scale change before it is too late. (Smith, We should allow failing arts organizations to die., 2014) Smith argues that organizations need more, better-trained program officers that will design superior systems to capture more robust data and thereby improve organizational outcomes as measured by impact. In addition to this, organizations need founders that are truly passionate about their cause and have the capacity to recognize (much like Jobs and Dell) when their organizations stray off course.

Further to this point, arts organizations need leaders. It is undeniable that the organizations that value their staff and push them to grow are the ones that get attention. (McLeer Jr., 2014) Better staff and better professionals equate to better organizations and a healthier industry overall. (McLeer Jr., 2014) Many arts organizations seem to lack the foresight to invest enough into their staff which quickly results in a spiral to the bottom. This trend will become even more pervasive as Millennials, who value growth and development more than a steady paycheck, become the dominant force in the marketplace. Focusing on the people element will set the foundation for all future growth.

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### SOME IDEAS

Numerous academics, practitioners and artists have their perspective on what can be done to drive the demand curve in the industry while at the same time dissolving unsuccessful organizations.

### SHIFTING FUNDS

Ragsdale suggests shifting public and private funds towards small to mid-sized organizations. The size of the average grant currently sits at \$25,000 per year and has sat stagnant at that amount for the better part of this decade. Interestingly, even with that size, most of the funding is allocated towards the largest organizations in a specific

sector. Although this is a U.S. statistic, and to certain extent not identical, making changes to the types of organizations being funded in Canada is also worth exploring.

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#### TAXING THE LARGE TO SUPPORT THE SMALL

Ragsdale further offers the option of supporting smaller organization by funding them through a type of taxation on the larger organizations. It is essentially wealth redistribution but on an arts organization level. This would be extremely difficult to implement and it would not solve the problems outlined, as the system would be penalizing the successful organizations to support the small and unsuccessful ones. This is at best a temporary measure to ensure that the large organizations that are being supported are not the organizations that are teetering on the verge of dissolution.

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#### TERM LIMITS FOR ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

This third option outlines a plan to have maximum durations for terms in artistic organizations. This would apply to artistic leaders, managing/executive leaders, board members, etc. Adopting this methodology would force the organization to make changes and ensure that the outcomes remain fresh and vibrant. Additionally, there would be the added benefit of frequently revisiting the performance of the organization and thereby removing the pressures faced by board members to not close organizations while under their tenure. (Bach, 2009) Although this seems like a very reasonable suggestion, it would be difficult to implement and even Ragsdale acknowledges that there are significant issues surrounding job security.

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#### AVOIDING REDUNDANCY

The fundamental concept for sustainability in this industry is a focused movement towards unique and focused offerings. Much like any business facing increased competition, arts organizations cannot be all things to all people. They must evolve and become sophisticated at targeting a specific niche market and redirecting focus and attention towards it. Ideally, the new target market would be less competitive and more lucrative with a greater potential for impact, community response

and therefore sustainability. If an organization cannot find that new market, or chooses not to due to its mandate, values, missions and/or goals, it then becomes irrelevant and should be dissolved.

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#### THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

An example of an organization that made the tough decision to cease operations was the Travelling Jewish Theater, which was encouraged to move past the goals and mission they were originally founded under and pursue a course of action that would allow the organization to continue at the expense of its original mandate. The founder however chose to wind down the company rather than become, "Just another theater company doing work that any other theater company could do." (Ragsdale, Are we a sector defined by our permanently failing organizations?, 2012)

*"The sad part is that in the years leading up to our decision to finally close down, it seemed as if we were being punished for our commitment to be a home for artists. Some foundations and consultants implied and sometimes said straight out that to attempt to have artists at the center of the company and pay them a living wage was frivolous, unrealistic and irresponsible. Perhaps. But as economic conditions forced us to change that basic aspect of our identity, it became harder and harder for us to accomplish our mission of creating and presenting original work. When we recognized that the only way to even have a chance of surviving was to become one more theater producing plays that could just as easily be done by a host of other companies, we saw no reason to continue."*

*Corey Fischer – Travelling Jewish Theater*



## ONCE THE DECISION IS MADE

Closures can vary from detailed calculated maneuvers to complete and utter dysfunction. The size, scope and age of the organization all play a large part. Regardless of these traits however, a detailed analysis of the options available to the organization is essential. Specialists in this field agree that every organization is different. (Bach, 2009) Large organizations with facilities and permanent collections are fundamentally different from those that are small and financially fragile. In any case, intentionally dissolving an organization is preferred to forced bankruptcy.

Due consideration should be given to the impact of the closure. Large organizations have broad relationships in the community and closing abruptly impacts the broader the community and its ability to access the arts. Dissolving the organizations while outstanding tickets are still out in the community builds negative associations for other arts institutions and should be avoided. (Bach, 2009)

Staff, board members and other volunteers need to be respected and reputations and relationships must be preserved. Breaking news to those various stakeholders should be done in an honest and transparent way. Recognition, severance and retirement benefits should be agreed to and offered to staff including artists who may be relying on the income.

The closing of an organization presents with it an opportunity to celebrate the impact the organization has had. Farewell events, tours, wakes, and other “events” have been used to honor the organization’s accomplishments. (Bach, 2009) The opportunity to share oftentimes allows the organization to re-introduce the community to new art-related organizations. Most organizations don’t consider their archives, but ensuring that these are retained as a permanent record is critical to guaranteeing that the legacy left behind can be built on.

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## THE ROLE OF THE FUNDERS

Funders truly need to change their perspective when examining the closure of an organization. (Bach, 2009) Encouraging funders to take the perspective of an entrepreneur, evaluating the degree of effectiveness as it relates to the life cycle stage

of the organization. Funders are in a unique position to be able to promote a productive discussion about closure earlier than anyone else. More importantly, funders can set benchmarks that would be leading indicators of possible struggles that can be used to trigger discussions about closure or dissolution. Setting governance and exit strategies should be treated the same as succession planning. (Bach, 2009) Waiting until the organization starts to experience problems to have these discussions brings about a lot of the ambiguity and resentment.

Funders are also encouraged to build structures that encourage safe and private discussions between the organization and the funder. Organizations which have funders who take on roles such as confidential advisor and sounding board are usually far more effective at achieving an orderly end. Bach makes the argument that public funders may have an instrumental role in “closure counseling.” This is an absolute win as having funding organizations learn from previous mistakes would be instrumental in evolving the sector. Furthermore, this would hopefully evolve the funder role into something that would eventually provide counselling before it is too late. Learning from the mistakes of other organizations would possibly allow their organizations to recognize troubling symptoms prior to it being too late. Evolving the role of the funders would be critical to evolving the industry as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

*“An organization often dies much as it lived, reflecting its unique characteristics, strengths, and foibles.” (Bach, 2009)*

This paper outlined some of the idiosyncrasies in the arts industry, theories and recent arguments for and against standardized dissolution of arts organizations. Further to this, some of the more practical roles and key activities have also been outlined.

The systems in place today assume that not-for-profits will live on forever. With today’s environment and the pace of change, modern day arts organizations can no longer take their existence for granted. “The opportunity granted here is for the

existing organizations to conceptualize, reorganize the not-for-profit structure into a more fluid form.” (Bach, 2009)

The perspective taken towards the dissolution of arts organizations must change. It is only by removing the stigma associated with the closure of any organization that the industry can move towards freeing up resources for the new and the vibrant through sustainable organizations. This can only be done only by changing the perspective from sustaining the weak to one of driving the strong with a focus on creating art, delivering art or sustaining the artist.

*“Beyond this, if an organization is artistically stagnant, losing significant audience, financially undisciplined or unsound, or irrelevant in its community, funders could do something else — they could just say no. That in and of itself would be a service to the field.” (Lutman, 2010)*

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