

What is Our Compass?

Some Guiding
Principles for Cultural
Organisations during
Volatile Times

Low Sze Wee

Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre

The complex dynamics of the past decade, especially during the pandemic, encompassing destabilising shifts in the global and local socio-economic, digital, health and environmental arenas, have birthed a new age of change. Low Sze Wee identifies four principles which can help guide cultural organisations through turbulent times.

To say that we live in volatile times today seems like a truism. The rise of the Internet has led to a vast expansion in worldwide connectivity, and an exponential increase in information and digital data. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world into disarray at an unprecedented scale. Decades of environmental neglect and harm have finally caught up with us. Many communities are now faced with the crippling challenges of rising sea levels, pollution, the extinction of species, and the depletion of natural resources that we had long assumed would last forever.

As much as many of us instinctively crave stability and the status quo, the pace of change and its ensuing disruptions will inevitably grow in the coming years. Many of these changes and disruptions are also systemic or worldwide in nature, and, therefore, beyond the control of individuals and organisations. Thus, it would not be feasible to respond with fixed solutions or to prepare a multitude of contingency plans beforehand. Rather, it might be more helpful for organisations to think about developing a set of attitudes or principles which would stand them in good stead, regardless of the pace of change in the external world. In other words, when faced with an ever-tumultuous environment, what kind of compass should cultural organisations have in navigating choppy waters?

Navigate Volatile Times With Clarity of Purpose

It is important for an organisation to be crystal-clear about its key reason for being. What is the key outcome which the organisation hopes to achieve? Once the purpose is clearly defined and understood, then, regardless of how the external environment changes, clarity of purpose would help guide the organisation towards making the right decision in difficult situations.

For instance, when an organisation holds a music concert as part of its annual programming, it is important to ask why the concert is being held. Is it to support local talent? If so, then the next question to ask would be whether organising a concert is the best way to support musicians. Or is it to generate revenue for the organisation through ticket sales? If so, then the next question to ask would be whether organising a concert is the best way to generate revenue. Or is it to get audiences to better appreciate local music? If so, the next question would be whether organising a concert is the best way to raise appreciation levels. This line of inquiry demonstrates that there are many different possible objectives that a concert could fulfil. Hence, when a disruptive event like COVID-19 suddenly occurs, which renders large physical audience groups untenable, how an organisation responds would depend on the key objective which the organisation wants to fulfil. Would organising an online concert still serve the same objective? If not, then another solution would be needed.

However, in order for an organisation to be clear about its purpose, all its key stakeholders need to be aligned and on the same wavelength.

For instance, if an organisation has a governing board, then it is imperative that the board and management are clear about their common purpose. If the organisation is primarily funded by an agency, then it is critical that there is clear agreement between funder and organisation on the latter's key purpose. Lack of clarity on this aspect means that the management's future ability to respond swiftly and decisively to the fast-changing environment would be severely hampered. Using the above scenario as an example, if management feels that its key objective is to support local artists, then organising an online concert would be a good solution as it would serve to fulfil the same purpose. However, if the board is of the view that the organisation's key priority is to generate revenue, then organising an online concert might not be ideal since online audiences are known to be generally less willing to pay for online content.

Navigate Volatile Times With Clarity of Audience

It is equally important to have a clear understanding of the key audience for whom the purpose was intended. Once this is done, then regardless of how the external environment changes, the organisation's key audience remains the same. The only issue for the organisation will then be to determine how the external changes affected its key audience, and then to revise its strategies accordingly. The reverse also holds true. If the organisation is unclear about its key audience or defines it so broadly that it is synonymous with the general public, then the task of ascertaining how external changes affected diverse audiences will be extremely challenging for the organisation.

After the key audience is clearly defined, then it becomes important for the organisation to ensure that its staff develops and maintains a good understanding of this audience group. Very often, the staff tend to be caught up in executing tasks and completing deliverables without having clarity on whether the deliverables had any impact on the intended audience. There also need to be consistent and regular channels between the organisation and its key audience, so that compliments and complaints can be received, analysed and acted upon by the organisation in a timely manner.

Navigate Volatile Times With Clarity of Understanding

In a disruptive environment, making sound decisions is difficult. Sometimes, as the situation deteriorates before our eyes, decisions are made in haste. Other times, solutions that provide immediate relief are quickly adopted to stem the tide. We might even follow what others in the same predicament have done to mitigate the risks of failure.

For instance, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, when on-site cultural performances were prohibited, many organisations switched to livestreaming their events on social media platforms. On many levels, this worked out well. The performers could continue to make a living. Consumers could enjoy the same offerings, albeit in a digital format. And many organisers of livestreamed events gained online viewership numbers that often exceeded

many times the physical capacity of their original performance venues. This seemed like a win-win situation for all concerned. However, there are downsides to using digital technology. For instance, although the online viewership numbers can be extremely high, the backend data indicates that many viewers only watch the first few minutes or even seconds of an online programme. The number who watch the programme from start to finish is much lower. Hence, it is important to recognise that the level of engagement from watching a few minutes will be much poorer compared to watching the programme in its entirety. This issue becomes even more critical if the intended purpose of the programme is closely related to its content, such as promoting the appreciation of local music.

Therefore, whenever an organisation adopts a course of action, it is important that it has a clear understanding of the implications. While perfect knowledge is impossible, an organisation should, at least, be aware of the possible trade-offs and alternatives when considering various solutions. With such awareness, it will be much less likely that we will be taken by surprise when things do not turn out the way we expected them to. We will then be mentally prepared to pivot and change course once again.

The need to have clarity of understanding also implies that it is imperative for an organisation to have staff with a diverse range of experience, expertise and interests. No single CEO can possibly be an expert in everything. However, it is entirely feasible for the leader of an organisation to try his or her best to reduce group-think and echo-chamber effects by actively looking for staff who can complement one another's strengths and weaknesses.

Navigate Volatile Times by Doing More With Less

When the external environment constantly changes, this often means that organisations have to respond quickly and be prepared to make revisions and improvements along the way. Operating in such volatile times is akin to running a perpetual marathon and not completing a short sprint. Hence, it becomes important for organisations to use their limited resources wisely.

One way to achieve this is by doing more with less. For instance, the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) recently launched a series of online videos called *One of Us*. It features about 20 local personalities and their connections to the five major Chinese dialect cultures in Singapore: Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese. The personalities included chefs, social media influencers, singers, and business owners who shared their personal journeys in promoting and preserving their own dialect cultures. The video series generated high viewership and positive responses.

Often, such a positive outcome might prompt an organisation to produce other videos which could garner similarly good results. However, this would entail spending more resources to create new content which might or might not have the same outcome. In SCCC's case, we decided to convert the content from the video series into a travelling exhibition. In this way, since the content had already been produced for the video series, the only additional costs for SCCC was that incurred in the conversion of

the content into exhibition panels and the search for venues which could host such exhibitions. To date, this exhibition has travelled to malls and libraries, and has been seen by people who might not have caught the online video series. This approach allowed SCCC to capitalise on a pre-existing product that had proven to be popular with online viewers, and share it in a different format with different audiences, including groups with little or no access to our digital content. This extended the shelf-life of content produced by SCCC. It also had the benefit of triggering the curiosity of those who had seen the travelling exhibition, prompting them to check out the online videos on the SCCC's Youtube channel.

This ability to leverage existing resources demands creativity and out-of-the-box thinking.

Hence, it is critical for leaders to encourage such approaches from everyone in his or her organisation. Creativity is not limited to the few geniuses like Albert Einstein. Rather, everyone is capable of creative thinking. Creativity is linked to having a keen sense of curiosity, the ability to make connections between things that are not usually related, and the capacity to generate new ideas or solutions. Hence, it behoves leaders to create working environments which encourage such traits to emerge from their colleagues.

There are no standard one-size-fits-all solutions for surviving and thriving in a volatile world. Rather, having the right set of principles or attitudes will help guide cultural organisations to develop and choose the best solutions for themselves. □

About the Author



Low Sze Wee is Chief Executive Officer of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. With a background in law, he later completed postgraduate studies in History of Art from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 1999, and Southeast Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore in 2010. Sze Wee has curated many local and international exhibitions, including important retrospectives on Singaporean artists and the Singapore pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. Three of his exhibitions garnered the National Heritage Board (NHB) Exhibition Award in 2007, 2008 and 2009. He was also awarded the NHB Research Award in 2007 for his contributions to scholarship on Singapore and Southeast Asian art history. In 2013, Sze Wee was the first Singaporean to be named a fellow of the prestigious Clore Leadership Programme. Formerly heading the curatorial departments at the Singapore Art Museum and then National Gallery Singapore, he was a key member of the inaugural team that oversaw the National Gallery's opening in 2015. Sze Wee has also been involved in strategic arts planning and policy in Singapore's Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.