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Co-Create Arts Ottawa Report:
Governance, Inclusion, and Volunteer Engagement

ARTS OTTAWA

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Introduction

The Co-Create Arts Ottawa initiative revealed a vibrant, values-led vision for Arts Ottawa's governance and community engagement. Participants highlighted a need for structures that reflect lived experience, foster mentorship, and embed equity at all levels—from policy to participation.

Arts Ottawa is committed to driving change through a collaborative and inclusive model, fostering deeper community relationships and promoting innovation. Our governance is founded upon the belief in collective action as the pathway to innovation and solutions for the complex challenges facing the arts sector today. The new model promotes a shift from centralized to distributed decision-making through collective leadership.

To collectively shape Arts Ottawa's governance structures, Arts Ottawa interest holders (artists, culture workers, and community members) will work together in co-learning and co-creation. Our Learning Labs and Co-Creation Labs introduced key themes: governance, advocacy, artist leadership, trust-building, and cross-sector collaboration.

The aim was to design a governance model rooted in shared leadership, care and community-driven decision-making.

Learning Labs

Arts Ottawa invited community members to participate in an innovative co-creation session where artists are at the center of governance. Participants heard from various leaders and practitioners, and after reflected on collective key takeaways.

The key threads that connected all three Learning Labs:

- **Equity is not a value**—it's a practice. From decision-making to volunteer roles, governance must remove barriers and center diverse voices.
- **Artists are not advisors**—they are leaders. Their cultural knowledge and relational approaches are critical to how we govern.
- **Shared governance is cultural work**. How we lead reflects how we live and care for one another—building structures of support, not control.

Key Takeaways from the Learning Labs for Co-Creation Workshop Preparation:

1. **Shared Governance**
   - Power must be shared—not symbolic.
   - Artists and community members deserve real decision-making roles.
   - Governance can be flat, creative, and grounded in relationships.
2. **Advocacy as Collective Action**
   - Advocacy is everyone's responsibility.
   - A unified cultural voice is stronger than siloed efforts.
   - Equity must be at the heart of policy work.
3. **Volunteerism in Governance**
   - Volunteers need flexible, meaningful roles and support.
   - Honorariums, training, and mentorship matter.
   - Equity means recognizing when roles should be compensated, not just donated.

Co-Creation Labs

Arts Ottawa invited community members to participate in an innovative co-creation session where artists are at the centre of governance, and advocacy, equity, and volunteerism play pivotal roles in shaping the leadership structure.

Participants co-created the core elements of a Governance Framework that reflected community values, ensuring leadership that is accountable, transparent, and community-driven.

This session was designed to ensure that the voices and values of participants, artists, community organizers, arts advocates, shape the governance framework of Arts Ottawa.

The Workshop

Two labs were held on **April 24 and 26, 2025**. Each 4.5 hour session engaged over 40 diverse participants in round table and cafe-style activities:

1. **Volunteer Journey:** mapping the journey of volunteers in governance or operations.
2. **Empathy Map:** mapping the current and the desired experiences, and recommended actions for the organization in the lens of distinct personas selected by participants.
3. **Role Canvas:** outlining the key roles and responsibilities of the three governance groups, Board of Directors, Core Leadership and Community Advisory.
4. **Decision Making Relationship:** reflecting on how values—like equity, transparency, and reciprocity—can shape decision-making models, and how they can be presented visually.

Co-Creation Labs

Key Takeaways:
- A Governance Charter that integrates advocacy, artist leadership, and volunteerism into a shared leadership model.
- Clear roles, responsibilities, and criteria for selection based on the collective wisdom of the group.
- Actionable next steps for the implementation of the governance model.

Governance Framework

1. Governance Model: Principles and Structure

Arts Ottawa's governance structure is designed to ensure organizational accountability, artistic relevance, and community-rooted decision-making. Drawing from extensive co-creation workshops and lived experience, the model acknowledges that governance is not only operational but relational. It positions community voice, strategic direction, and institutional stability as mutually reinforcing pillars.

The model consists of three interconnected bodies that reflect a continuum of involvement and shared responsibility.

A. Shared Governance Bodies

Core Leadership Circle (CLC): Acts as a strategic bridge between grassroots input and operational decisions. It synthesizes insights, facilitates equity-based strategy, and supports implementation.
Community Advisory Group (CAG): Serves as a bridge between the community and the organization. Members bring lived experience and ensure the organization remains artistically relevant and inclusive.
Board of Directors: Provides legal, financial, and fiduciary oversight. It anchors continuity but must stay connected to community realities through shared touchpoints.

B. Key Governance Principles

Rotating Leadership: Leadership roles are not fixed, allowing for fresh voices and equity in participation.
Touch-point Individuals: Bridge across governance layers to maintain alignment and accountability.
Non-Hierarchical Structures: Authority is distributed across groups using a values-based, iterative framework.
Feedback Loops: Decision-making is cyclical, not linear, with regular evaluation and re calibration.

C. Principles Underpinning the Structure

1. **Distinct but Interconnected Roles**
   - CAG functions as the voice of community and cultural relevance.
   - CLC translates community input into strategic direction.
   - The Board provides fiduciary oversight and organizational continuity.
2. **Inclusive Participation and Criteria**
   - Governance eligibility values lived experience, cultural fluency, and equity-informed leadership—not only institutional expertise.
   - Roles are filled through open, supported pathways that prioritize diversity and accessibility.
3. **Cyclical Decision-Making**
   - Decisions are relational, moving in a loop: CAG → CLC → Board → Staff → CAG.
   - All bodies are expected to respond to each other's input and return decisions to the community.
4. **Supported Leadership Readiness**
   - Members are onboarded through mentorship, peer learning, and accessible resources.
   - Service terms are rotational, allowing energy to flow through the governance system without burnout.
5. **Compensation and Accessibility**
   - Participation is supported through stipends, hospitality, transportation, translation, and digital access tools.
6. **Community Accountability**
   - Public reporting, events, and storytelling create transparent feedback loops to community members.
   - Decisions must be traceable back to the community's input and reviewed regularly for alignment.
7. **Strategic Function Focus**
   - Each governance group has a clearly articulated Strategic Function Statement, beyond task lists, ensuring that all roles contribute to the broader mission of Arts Ottawa.

D. Key Structural Elements

Conflict Resolution: Built-in protocol led by neutral facilitators
Access & Equity: Ensure honoraria/stipends, language access, physical accessibility and accommodations
Staff Role: Staff presence at both CLC and CAM; support implementation and tracking
Decision Tracker Tool: Shared tool to document decisions, status, and actions

2. Governance Role Clarity and Support Needs

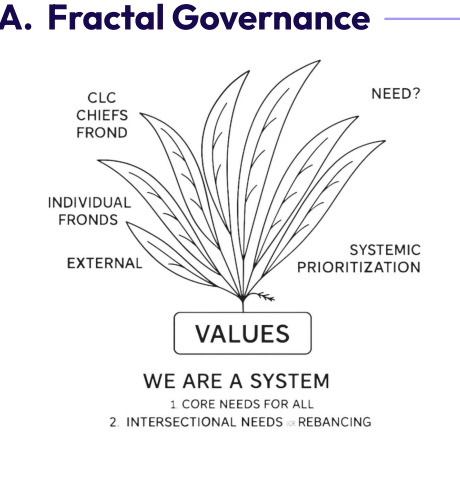
Governance Body	Strategic Role	Key Gaps	Support Recommendations
Board of Directors	**Oversight and Accountability** Institutional continuity, legal/ financial compliance	Disconnection from community, limited artist representation	Role clarity, equity training, stronger touchpoints
Community Leadership Group (CLC)	**Strategy and Synthesis** Strategy development, sector bridging, facilitation	Needs defined authority, onboarding, conflict resolution support	Formalized rotation, mentorship, policy clarity
Community Advisory Group (CAG)	**Community Voice** Community input, outreach, program ideation	Lacks decision-making power, risk of burnout or lost interest	Compensation, logistics support, structural integration

Support Recommendations for all groups: training and onboarding, safe and inclusive meetings, accessibility accommodations.

3. Visual Governance Models: Ecosystem Approach

Lab participants reflecting on how values can shape decision-making models, and how they can be presented visually. Below are three examples from what was created by the groups.

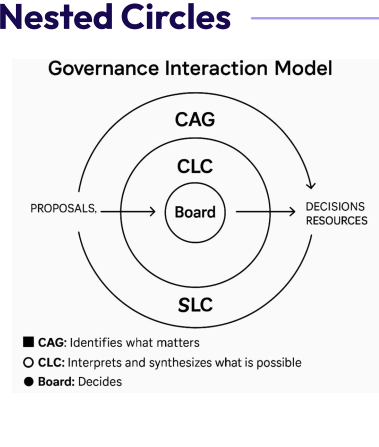
A. Fractal Governance



Leadership is likened to a plant with fronds—each frond representing a focus area led by CLC members.

The root system—values like reciprocity and equity—nourishes all actions.

B. Nested Circles

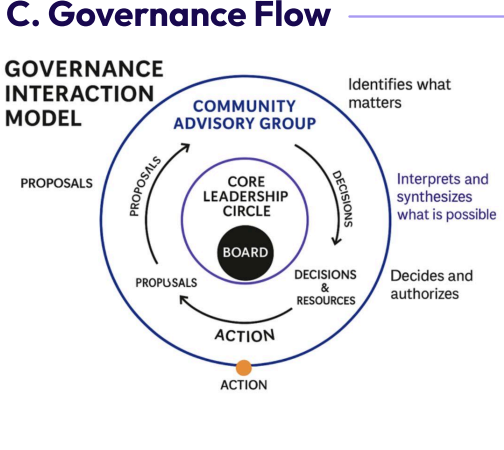


Governance Interaction Model
CAG
CLC
Board
SLC
PROPOSALS
DECISIONS RESOURCES
CAG: Identifies what matters
CLC: Interprets and synthesizes what is possible
Board: Decides

Governance is structured in three circles: **Board** (inner), **CLC** (middle), and **CAG** (outer).

Emphasis on dialogue, rotating leadership, and shared action hubs.

C. Governance Flow



Decision-making follows a community-led cycle:

Ideation → Collaboration → Integration → Implementation → Evaluation

4. Volunteer Journey Analysis

Lab participants mapped the journey of volunteers participating in governance or operations. Using a structured five-stage framework to map the volunteer lifecycle, participants identified:
- Key experiences volunteers face at each stage
- Common barriers that prevent full participation
- Actionable supports that can make involvement more inclusive and rewarding

The analysis synthesizes each group's insights and identifies cross-cutting patterns, opportunities for improvement, and critical areas for intervention.

Stage	Key Needs	Barriers	Recommendations
Attract	Belonging, clarity, pride	Jargon, unclear roles	Value-based outreach, stipends
Onboard	Mentorship, clear expectations	Language/class barriers	Buddy system, onboarding kits
Engage	Recognition, alignment, flexibility	Poor communication	Events, food, strong comms
Grow	Skill-building, leadership paths	Time, no roadmap	Mentorship, growth tracking
Exit	Celebration, closure, reflection	No feedback, legacy loss	Exit interviews, legacy roles

Key Recommendations

Adaptive and Innovative Governance

Arts Ottawa views governance as a living, adaptive system responsive to the needs and insights of its community. Through regular reviews, creative experimentation, and community-led activation points, the model is designed to remain agile and inclusive.
- **Encourage experimentation and iteration**
- **Use "Action Labs" to test new ideas quickly**
- **Regularly revisit and revise with community input**

Innovation is driven not by hierarchy but by feedback, trust, and co-creation.

Recommendations for next 6-12 months:

1. **Implement Leadership Across Bodies:**
   - Establish Community Advisory Group and Core Leadership Circle
   - Codify rotational terms, responsibilities/duties and transitions
2. **Build Formal Pathways for Inclusion**
   - Operationalize volunteer systems and create a centralized volunteer portal for tracking roles, training, opportunities, and recognition
3. **Invest in Relationship Infrastructure and Transparency**
   - Touch points, feedback loops, and storytelling mechanisms
   - Explore hosting town halls for public updates, open call for participation and leadership roles.

Methodology

All insights were developed through:
- **Data Analysis:** Interpreting participatory data through thematic codes (e.g., volunteer needs, governance clarity).
- **Role Mapping:** Comparing responsibilities across CLC, CAG, and the Board to identify overlaps, gaps, and dependencies.
- **Visual Interpretation:** Analyzing governance diagrams to distill values and decision flows.

Labs were designed and facilitated by **Annalee Adair of Evoke Culture 2.0**. Insights and analysis of Lab data were also prepared by Evoke Culture 2.0.

Appendix A: Learning Labs Summary

Video recaps of the learning lab videos are available online.

Learning Lab #1: Governance Models and Advocacy in the Arts Sector

Speakers: Reuben M. Nashali, Executive Director at the Social Planning Council of Ottawa; Terri-Lynn Brennan, Executive Director of the LodgePole Arts Alliance; Kelly Wilhelm, leads the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University; and Toby Fyfe, previously the President and CEO of the Institute on Governance.

Purpose: Explore how arts organizations and leaders can work collectively to build advocacy strategies that are rooted in equity, cultural relevance, and long-term systems change.

Summary: This Lab reframed advocacy from an individual or board-led activity to a collective and creative cultural practice. Panelists highlighted how advocacy can be embedded in day-to-day programming, relationships, and storytelling. The Lab also emphasized the role of cultural organizations in policy change, and called for equity-centered, artist-informed advocacy strategies that strengthen the sector.

3 Key Takeaways: Advocacy as Collective Impact:

1. **Redefine Advocacy as a Shared Responsibility.** Move beyond advocacy as a board function—activate the whole organization and network to speak collectively for systemic change.
2. **Align Advocacy with Equity and Cultural Justice.** Frame advocacy goals through a justice lens; amplify underrepresented voices and cultural needs.
3. **Create a Shared Advocacy Platform.** Develop a collective policy agenda across the sector, informed by community priorities, and grounded in cultural relevance.

Learning Lab #2: Artists as Leaders

Speakers: Alejandro Salgado Cendales, founder and Executive Director at the Multicultural Artists' Coalion (MAC-CAM); Rachel Weldon, founder and director of Debaser; Sarah Conn, Artistic Producer of the National Arts Centre's National Creation Fund; Linh VH Nguyen, artist and board member of Debaser.

Purpose: To explore inclusive governance models in the arts sector that centre artists, foster equity, and reimagine leadership and decision-making structures.

Summary: This Lab explored the need for a new governance model rooted in equity, shared responsibility, and artist leadership. Panelists discussed how traditional nonprofit structures often silo decision-making power, and emphasized collaborative models that place artists and community members at the heart of governance. Using personal stories and organizational examples, the session challenged power hierarchies and offered human-centered alternatives grounded in cultural relevance and care.

3 Key Takeaways:

1. **Artists Must Be at the Governance Table.** Governance structures in arts organizations must actively include artists in leadership and decision-making—not just as advisors, but as co-creators of strategy and accountability.
2. **Reimagine Governance Through Equity.** True equity in governance requires changing how power is distributed—shifting from traditional, hierarchical models toward relational, shared, and inclusive models rooted in trust and reciprocity.
3. **Systems Change Requires Cultural Change.** Governance reform is not just structural—it's cultural. Organizations must create safe, brave spaces where challenging conversations about race, privilege, and access can take place as part of evolving governance practices.

Learning Lab #3: Redefining Volunteerism in Governance

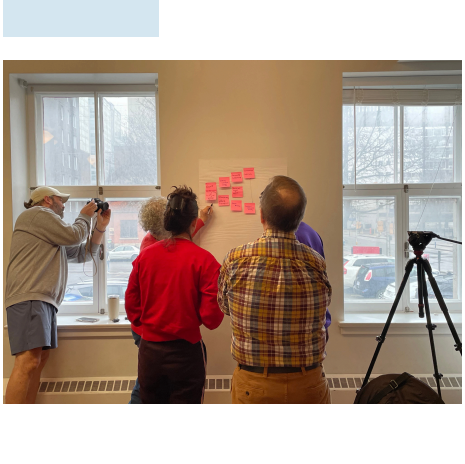
Speakers: Kaite Burkholder Harris, Executive Director at the Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa; Leah Cogan, Chair at PAL Ottawa; Nadine Snowling, Director of Programs at Volunteer Ottawa; Wilemijn Bunskoek, Executive Director at Apartment613.

Purpose: To understand how volunteerism intersects with governance, equity, and sustainability in the arts sector—and how it must evolve.

Summary: This Lab highlighted urgent issues in volunteer recruitment and retention, especially in the arts. Panelists noted barriers like financial constraints, time poverty, and lack of recognition—calling for volunteerism to be seen as part of a resourced and supported ecosystem. The conversation emphasized that equity in volunteerism requires rethinking roles, offering compensation, and investing in development and training. Volunteers should be treated as strategic contributors, not stopgaps for under funding.

3 Key Takeaways:

1. **Volunteerism must be resourced.** Infrastructure, support, and compensation are not optional—they are equity requirements.
2. **Some roles should be paid.** Especially those demanding lived experience, emotional labour, or expert contribution.
3. **Volunteerism is a leadership pathway.** Invest in professional development, mentorship, and meaningful governance participation.



Top 3 Takeaways for Governance Charter Development

1. **Design for Equity and Inclusion:** Embed flexible and inclusive volunteer pathways that acknowledge diverse barriers and capacities—this ensures all members can participate meaningfully in governance roles.
2. **Compensate and Support Contributors:** Include mechanisms for honoraria, professional development, and expense coverage, especially for lived experience professionals and artists who are often expected to contribute unpaid labor.
3. **Professionalize and Prepare Volunteers:** Develop onboarding processes, mentorship, and governance literacy training for volunteer leaders—support them as strategic contributors, not just symbolic members.