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Responding to crises: constructing a response through organizational change

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ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 crisis exposed inequities in civic, funding, and programmatic policies – often grounded in systemic oppression and White Supremacy – community based, youth-focused organizations, such as Creative Youth Development (CYD) programs, were catapulted into unplanned changes in order to survive. In this tumultuous environment, organizations had to struggle, innovate, and revolutionize their practices, oftentimes without being able to properly reflect or predict consequences. This paper explores what the pandemic and its unspooling consequences are teaching us about what we need in a framework for thinking about organizational change and adaptation in times of crisis. Specifically, the author discusses how earlier frameworks need to expand to include: organizational development, distributed leadership, and growth mindset. The article concludes with a set of provocations derived from community-based conversations with organizational leaders as they innovated their practices in the difficult months of March and April 2020.

KEYWORDS

Leadership; organizational development; distributed leadership; growth mindset; creative youth development; arts education; youth

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis caused rampant disruption and unpredictable consequences within the fields of arts/culture and education in the United States beginning in March 2020. It exposed rifts and weaknesses within public policies and the American social contract. Educational systems, cultural institutions, and community organizations reeled from the shock of rapidly changing practices: community health guidelines, physical distancing resulting from hastily implemented municipal shelter-in-place orders, and more. These changes all amplified negative impacts for Black and other communities of color and exposed oppressive systems grounded in oppression and White Supremacy.

Within the community arts and arts education fields, organizations quickly cobbled together initial responses determined to care for young people served through their programs and the work and livelihoods of the adults leading and sustaining the work. Changes were swift and, oftentimes, instinctual. In some cases, Creative Youth Development (CYD) programs – which are most often out-of-school programs focused on combining positive youth development with arts and cultural education practices grounded in social justice – left behind visual arts projects to deliver ready-made meals to

homes with immunocompromised or unemployed family members. Simultaneously, CYD programs had to modify their funding models, shift their employment practices, or enroll youth in thinking through what responses were needed and practical in a specific neighborhood.

At the height of these changes - during the months of March and April 2020 - my colleague, Dennie Palmer Wolf, and I began to attempt to capture what was happening in efforts to learn from this moment of rapid response. We observed the changes impacting the field of CYD and engaged in dialogues with organizational leaders of CYD programs. We asked them to help us explore the question: How are CYD programs constructing new pathways through the crisis?

It became abundantly clear, during those months, that this crisis was not just about COVID-19, but about its myriad impacts on all facets of community wellbeing. What became apparent is that the COVID-19 pandemic may be a once-in-a-generation challenge, other such crises are not rare, neither at the national nor the local level. Organizations have had to weather the distress of 9/11 and the financial collapse of 2008; the civil unrest resulting from the murder of Black civilians by the police, such as in the cases of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor,

George Floyd and countless others; as well as regional *force majeure* disruptions like Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the California Wildfires of 2019. Preparedness for crises has to be built into organizations, especially those that serve and are embedded in vulnerable communities. These organizations are at work in a culture where *business as usual* is a scrim behind which are inequalities and injustices that waste human capital and distort and destroy lives. In this paper, I will refer to the “crisis of 2020” as a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic recession along with the resounding negative impacts on communities of color stemming from systems of oppression. The latter are grounded in increasingly pervasive, but often unrecognized, assumptions of White Supremacy.

In the following pages, I will systematically explore the theoretical concepts which underpin the constructivist approaches we witnessed in the CYD sector; identify trends, which we observed in the response by CYD leaders; and offer a set of provocations derived from community-based conversations with organizational leaders as they innovated their practices. As a result, I hope that this paper offers arts education and CYD leaders a meaningful starting point as they consider their response to crises in the future.

An enriched framework for crisis response

As I observed the CYD field in March and April 2020, I noted three distinct trends, which set the stage for newly constructed pathways occurring in programs: organizational development, distributed leadership, and growth mindset. Below, I will provide a short description of what was observed, how the literature speaks to these terms, and how their application may fit into the CYD field.

Organizational development

In the early months of 2020, I was invited to observe gatherings of two regional networks of CYD organizational representatives (executive leadership, staff, and youth) convened by the San Diego Creative Youth Development Network and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Through my observations of the topical conversation being shared, many CYD organizations were subconsciously entering into the work of organizational development. This field of study was pioneered by Polish-born theorist Kurt Lewin (1890 – 1947) and is largely utilized in the for-profit business world. However, the underpinning theories, particularly

around change management, lend us some language to use to describe what we have seen in the CYD field in early 2020. This literature has been broadly applied in the fields of arts management and education, specifically in relation to the nonprofit sector in the United States. It is my hope to extend its application within the niche sub-field of CYD.

Lewin proposed a simple three-phase model of organizational development, whereby leaders manage the movement of an organization from the known current state through evolution to a new crystallized future state; it consists of ‘freezing,’ ‘changing,’ and ‘unfreezing’ (Hussain et al., 2016).

Throughout the conversations I observed in early April 2020, organizational representatives described how their programs were largely “frozen” due to the nature of the COVID-19 shutdowns nationwide. During a call of CYD program practitioners, hosted by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, one anonymous observer (2020) remarked that their building seemed to be frozen in time. Lewin describes this phenomenon as the ‘freezing’ or moving organizational operations into a holding pattern while strategic decisions – or ‘changing’ – are being made.

During the ‘changing’ phase, numerous stakeholders such as employees, management, and beneficiaries are involved in the reimagination of the work (Hussain et al., 2016). In the CYD programs I observed, executive leaders worked alongside staff and young people to reimagine their work. Though this process can, and mostly is, fostered intentionally, it can also occur intuitively, particularly in times of crisis for a company or organization. In the case of highly developed CYD organizations, intergenerational decision-making is part of their positive youth development work, thus is standard practice. One such CYD program, Elevated Thought in Lawrence, MA, originally froze programs into the status as they had always been conducted, and then changed based on the input of youth leaders. As of July, Elevated Thought’s programmatic schedule was unfreezing in a new re-invented, youth-led way.

As CYD programs began to grapple with the impact of the crisis, they moved from Lewin’s ‘changing’ phase to the ‘unfreezing’ or re-opening. This transition presented many challenges for CYD programs due to the rapid unspooling of consequences from the original COVID-19 pandemic as it transformed into an economic recession and civil unrest due to the killing of civilians at the hands of police – both crises which disproportionately impact the communities which house many CYD programs. As an

example, a CYD organization in San Diego County, CA successfully “unfroze” and re-froze shortly after in order to construct different pathways for their programming and the changing circumstances of their community beyond the public health emergency from the previous month: the impact of the economic recession and civic protests occurring in their neighborhoods.

From an outsider’s perspective, and considering the fluctuation of responses by observed CYD programs, I would argue that due to the ongoing nature of the crises of 2020, that the ‘unfreezing’ has yet to occur in the vast majority of CYD programs, and the ‘changing’ nature of Lewin’s second phase continues onward (through to the time of the authoring of this article).

Distributing leadership

During the ‘changing phase’ as described by Lewin, I noted several distinct changes – tied to traditional CYD practices – that influenced the constructivist approaches taken by CYD programs to reimagine new pathways for their programs in response to the crises of 2020. The first of which was decision making through distributed leadership.

CYD programs are, primarily, community-based nonprofit organizations, categorized by the 501(c)3 status of the Internal revenue code (Poulin, 2018). As such, the key decision-maker responsible for how the organization behaves in a moment of crises is likely to be the Executive Director, and perhaps the president of the Board of Directors. Due to the community-based nature of CYD programs, especially with their focus on youth development and youth leadership (Hare, 2020), I observed many CYD programs turning to youth leaders, parent and community advisory bodies, and their part- or full-time teaching artist staffs to make decisions.

This amplification of youth leadership speaks to the nature of distributed leadership in crisis decision-making occurring in CYD programs through the crises of 2020. There is not a formed consensus on a definition of shared leadership (Liang & Sandmann, 2015), but the core concept is that leadership does not reside in a sole individual, but rather is shared or distributed among a series of stakeholders (Gronn, 2002). Particularly during the crises of 2020 within CYD organizations, this featured what Liang and Sandman (2015) describe as expertise-based leadership:

Viewing the institution as a system, we ask ourselves these questions: Who is most likely to have the best

knowledge of symbolic practice? Who is most likely to have the highest public credibility to solicit and secure external funding? Who is most likely to be equipped with knowledge, experience, and skills dealing with politics? Who is most likely to be in a position to access resources and information and reach a broad audience? (p. 53).

Through such a framework, the executive leaders (e.g. Executive Directors and Presidents of the Board), rely on the expertise of members of their organization (or system, or network) to craft the most meaningful decisions for the CYD program.

For example, in the San Diego Creative Youth Development Network, when rapid response funds were to be distributed to help teaching artists recently unemployed by the network’s primary funder, the Clare Rose Foundation, the model for distribution was created by the teaching artists affected: “They were seen as the experts in what they needed during this trying time, so they got to make the decisions about how we would equitably approach the situation” (D’Arrigo, 2020). In a similar fashion, at Austin Soundwaves in Texas, the organization’s structural leaders turned to their youth board and advisory committee (made up of community members, families, and more) to help build out their revised programming schedule for online learning.

In both cases, those who know what they need most (or those with expertise in the situational context) were core to the decision-making process. Expertise-based distributed leadership helped construct new pathways for funding, employment, and programming. It decentralized power, and refocused priorities on the distributed nature of how CYD programs are often run.

Growth mindset

I also observed how programs constructed new pathways during their “changing” phase by adopting a growth mindset. A term that is often applied to individuals, it can be understood within the organizational development context when examining how individuals’ growth lead to the overall change within an organization. In my observations, I noted many leaders systematically re-inventing their work and using the catalyst of COVID-19 to begin the process. Their processes suggest the use of a growth mindset on both an individual and organizational level.

The concept of a growth mindset was first published by Carol Dweck (2007), where she describes a dichotomy between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset, and how they intertwine:

“... a [fixed mindset] belief that your qualities are carved in stone leads to a host of thoughts and actions, and ... a [growth mindset] belief that your qualities can be cultivated leads to a host of different thoughts and actions, taking you down an entirely different road” (p. 17).

A growth mindset enables organizations to respond to changing needs, even risking failure, in order to achieve continuous improvement (Harvard Business Review, 2014). This process is often observed through continuous development and ongoing change. In the case of CYD response to the COVID-19 crisis, I observed numerous organizations employing their inherent growth mindset strategy during and beyond the observed alignment with Lewin’s three phases of organizational change.

The Seattle-based CYD program, Arts Corps, flexed their growth mindset muscles in order to find ways of sustaining their teaching artists. First, they shifted their pedagogical delivery from in-person to online via public TV and YouTube. Then, realizing this work had to be financially sustainable, they navigated city-wide policies to classify their teaching artists as essential workers who generated arts-based lessons for at-home student learning. (See *Enrico et al. (2020) Re-imagining policy as a source of radical change: Artist, organization, and city* in this same issue of *Arts Education Policy Review*.)

I share these definitions and observed examples of organizational development, distributing leadership, and growth mindset in hopes of lending language to the phenomena observed through CYD organizations’ response to the crises of early 2020. This process will help the field tie its inherent constructivist approach to other well-studied fields in order to help grow, formalize, and change to become better prepared for crisis in the future. In the next section of this article, I will propose a model, derived from observations of over 40 programs in the early months of 2020, which may help us better understand the application of the previous mentioned ideas to aid in the response to crisis.

Proposing a working model

Based on this understanding of the kind of organizational change CYD and arts education leaders were navigating, my colleague and I sought to develop a simple and easily understandable model, which could help CYD leaders (especially amidst the rapid changing environment they were facing) locate themselves in rapid change and map their path forward. We began by examining much of the literature on

organizational change and selecting a simplified model, which we could modify to suit the language described in the previous sections of this article.

Over time many scholars have put language and modeling around the observed phenomena of personal or organizational change, especially in times of rapid response or crisis. Some of this literature comes from the study of creatives (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) and others from trust in gaming (Rohnke, 1984). Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) “flow” model emphasized the “dynamic system composed of person and environment, as well as the phenomenology of person-environment interactions” (90). This speaks to our observations of the interplay between individual leaders (whomever they may be) and the organizational and external environments for which they were interacting in response to the crises.

Similarly, Rohnke (1984) built a model with several objectives focused on building confidence, increasing mutual support, and developing agility (11). Though mostly applied in rock climbing and other similar activities, the visual model that has been derived by contemporary scholars of Rohnke’s work focused on Comfort, Learning, and Panic Zones.

In more recent years, this model was popularized and connected to organizational growth by Alvarado (2015) who described it as a frame to think about organizational response to crisis. This frame maps Comfort, Learning, and Panic Zones, as well as the corridors that exist within them which lead to opportunity: “As you step out of your comfort zone and into learning zones, you uncover new opportunities and possibilities as well. That’s because learning zones have corridors that lead to new opportunity” (1). In the case of crisis, one is not choosing to step out, but is, rather, forced out of their comfort zone. This leads to the corridors which are lined with numerous doors to opportunity, Alvarado says. I wondered: How can CYD programs sustain opportunity when navigating through comfort, learning, and panic zones?

I recognize that some of this language feels disconnected to the work of CYD programs. For example, the idea of “comfort” here relates to an individual and anxiety. However, when extrapolated, I take this to describe the everyday work of a CYD organization; work that does not drive high anxiety because that is what is known and how the organization generally operates. We chose Alvarado’s model because it was not intrinsically tied to any one type of activity (i.e. Csikszentmihalyi’s creativity or Rohnke’s adventure games), but rather was connected to organizational growth. Further, one could overlay Lewin’s three

phases of organizational development – freezing, changing, and unfreezing – to the spaces in between comfort, learning, and panic.

We modified Alvarado’s model slightly (in [Figure 1](#) pictured below) to incorporate language we heard through our observations of CYD program leaders into a parallel structure of zones:

- Fear & Uncertainty,
- Insight & Learning, and
- Sustained Opportunity.

Each zone represents the types of possible responses employed by programs and their leaders during a crisis. In the center, the ‘comfort zone’ is where programs were pre-crisis: their regular operating, mission-driven approach. The crisis, signified by the purple circle, could represent the myriad disruptions, ranging from global pandemics, financial crises, natural disasters, or even organization-specific ruptures like the loss of leadership.

The rings outside of the crisis align with Lewin’s phases of organizational development, with fear & uncertainty aligning with “freezing,” insight & learning aligning with “changing,” and sustained opportunity aligning with “unfreezing.”

The figure also portrays two scenarios that signify divergent pathways through crisis. The first, typical or ‘short circuit’ scenario, illustrates how a program’s path after crisis circling back to what is known: First it exits the comfort zone in fear and uncertainty as a result of a disruption, adapts briefly to the circumstances, but returns to its comfort zone, leaving behind the insights and learnings garnered during the crisis. The second opportunity scenario, which is propelled by our observed actions of CYD programs in distributed leadership and growth mindset, illustrates how programs and their leaders continue toward sustained opportunity: First, it exits the comfort zone as a result of disruptions, grapples with fear and uncertainty, gains insights and learnings adapting to new circumstances, and grows into sustained opportunities as a result.

Critical insights from leaders

When exploring this new model to help CYD leaders locate themselves in their journeys responding to the crises, we facilitated strategic conversations with CYD leaders to explore the question, “What allows organizations to seize the opportunity path?”

Building on this expanded version of Alvarado’s “Fear, Growth, and Opportunity Framework,” my

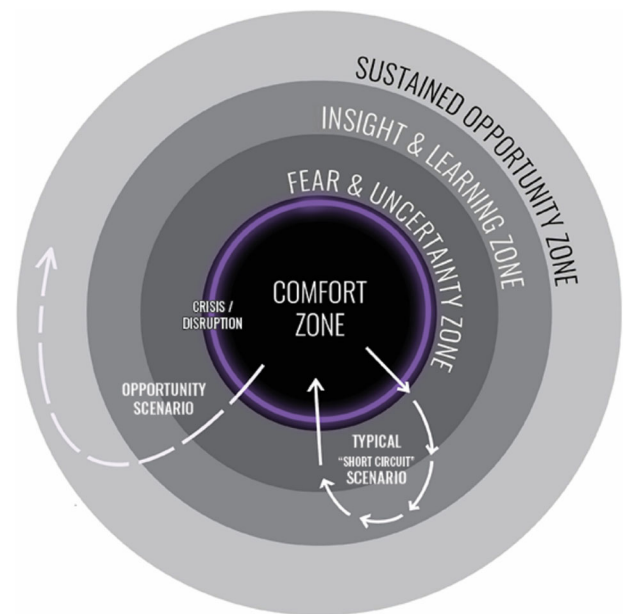


Figure 1. Design by Bridget Woodbury.

colleague and I connected by video conference calls with leaders (executive, staff, youth) of CYD programs. We collected responses from a representative sample ($n = 48$) of CYD program leaders that were convened by regional stakeholders in networks in Massachusetts, Pittsburgh, and San Diego, with others represented from Chicago, the Bay Area, San Antonio, central New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.

We began by sharing [Figure 1](#) with its zones of Fear & Uncertainty, Insight & Learning, and Sustained Opportunity and posed the question, “How are CYD programs constructing new pathways through the crisis?”

What we garnered from these dialogues were questions that CYD leaders were asking, represented in [Figure 2](#). After collecting these responses, we coded, reformed, and organized thematically the distinct queries of leaders as they emerged from the Fear & Uncertainty zone through the Insight & Learning Zone toward the Sustained Opportunity Zone. Five recurring action-oriented themes emerged:

- Harness Internal Reflections and Insights,
- Build Productive Collaborations,
- Strengthen Program Design,
- Improve Organizational Stability and Sustainability, and
- Instigate Shared Leadership

We mapped each of these themes in [Figure 2](#) against the questions and then organized by Zone in alignment with our proposed model. This allowed us to observe trends throughout time (presumably questions in the left-most arc were asked first, and the

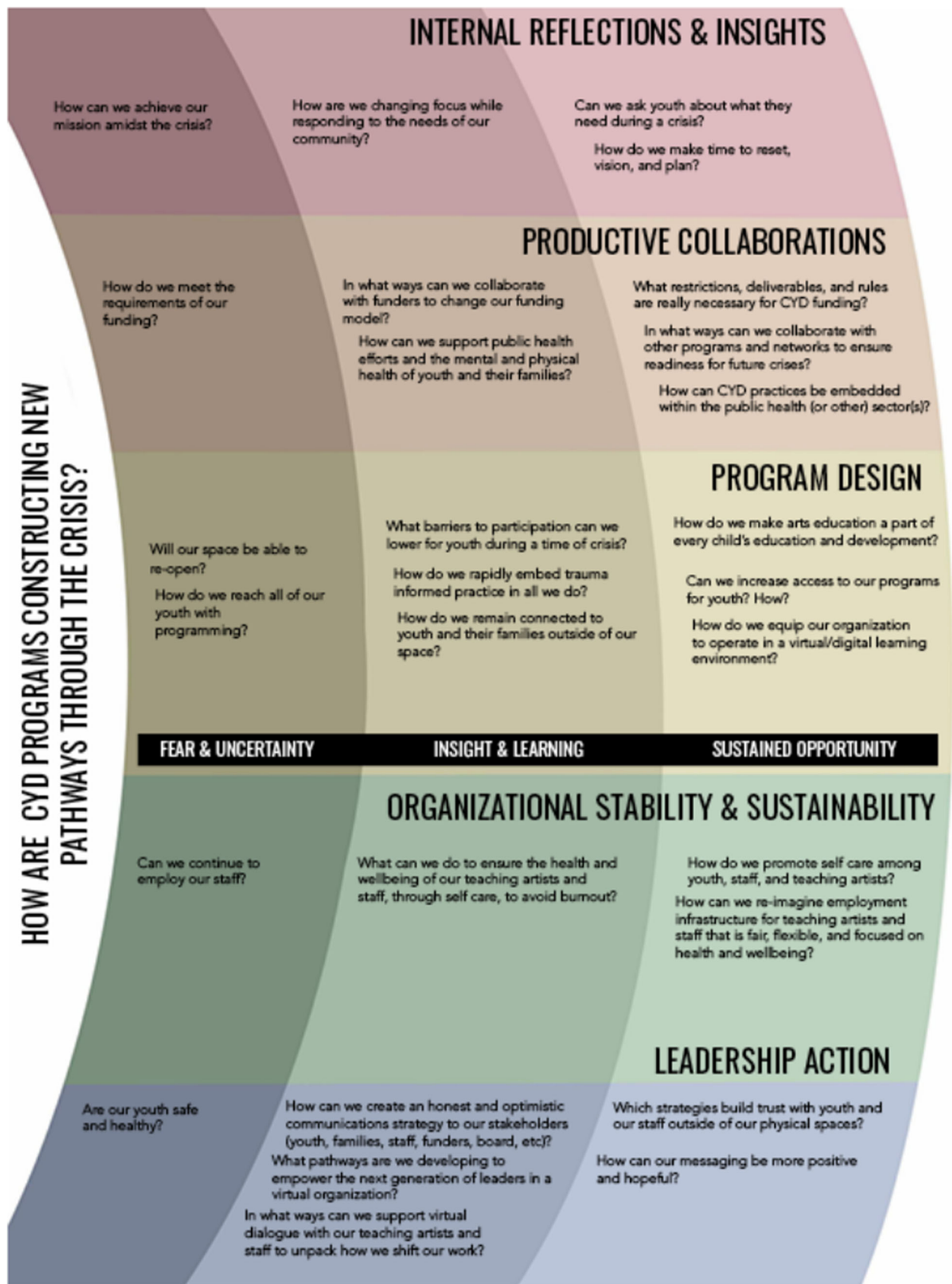


Figure 2. Design by Bridget Woodbury.

right-most arc were asked last). From here we gained insights to offer provocations to other CYD leaders about their own individual and organizational response as they confronted the crises.

These questions and provocations offered, bring leaders back to the concept of organizational development, as they seek to change and unfreeze their programs. Providing this modeling, mapping responses, and guiding questions offer leaders – who are short on time during this crisis – pathways to construct their futures and sustained opportunities. These act as drivers for the development and implementation of organizational policy (or even municipal or funding policy in some cases) that will sustain organizations beyond the 2020 crisis response. We envision that the connections drawn throughout this work elevate ideals held by the most local practitioners and can serve as a broadly applicable framework to ensure that CYD programs remain sustainable, agile, and responsive when forced into an environment of ever-changing circumstances.

Provocations for leaders

This initial analysis led us to propose provocations for CYD leaders – at all levels: executive, staff, and youth – to use to interrogate their strategies for navigating through the current (and future) crises:

Harness Internal Reflections and Insights

- Revisit moral compass: Review and strengthen mission and vision statements, strategic goals, and job descriptions. Does each and every one reflect the values of the organization to hold steady through a changing environment?
- Acknowledge and integrate diverse points of view to ensure honest dialogue within the organization: How are we engaging with our team even when decisions must happen rapidly?
- Create a vision and growth plan that reflects mission: Are we doing what is urgent and necessary for us and our community during changing circumstances?

Build Productive Collaborations

- Work with funders to shift funding models to support authentic work: Is this a true partnership collaborating together to find worthwhile solutions during uncertainty?
- Learn from other CYD organizations (and those in other sectors) doing strong and impactful work:

How are we plugged in with peers for knowledge-sharing?

- Examine opportunities to work cross-sector with organizations and efforts confronting the crisis: How can we be a piece of the puzzle?
- Build authentic leadership roles for youth, caregivers, and families: What structures can best support this when we cannot physically connect in our space?

Strengthen Program Design

- Construct virtual capacities in formats that reflect organization's values: What works best for our participants?
- Develop compelling evidence of impact: How can we translate what is actually happening to others when evaluation is not a priority within a crisis?

Improve Organizational Stability and Sustainability

- Evaluate expansions carefully: Are our responsive ideas mission-aligned and sustainable?
- Diversify streams of support and income: In what new ways can we balance the budget and remain solvent within uncertain futures?
- Review mission and program for fit within the wider ecology of CYD activity in your community: Where do we fit in the ecosystem amidst new priorities and community needs?

Instigate Leadership Actions

- Develop strategies that will permit organization to adapt more nimbly: How can we work best together and in what new ways?
- Build distributed leadership capacity roles to include staff, youth, families, and alumni: In what ways are their voices part of decision-making especially during a crisis and beyond?

There can be no real conclusion for this work – especially at the time of authoring this paper, since the crisis of 2020 is still unfolding. But it is our hope that by reflecting on their practices, CYD programs and their leaders will find ways of engaging with the opportunity scenario and emerge stronger with sustainable innovations to share. Further, we hope that the introspection of the models offered, will help future generations of leaders think about their organization's development before, during, and after a crisis.

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