FROM 'BEST PRACTICE' TO 'BEST FIT': MANAGEMENT OPTION FOR UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN ARTS THEATRE

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Abstract

This paper is a prescriptive study of theatre management options for the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan. The aim is to promote the Arts Theatre's efficiency and effectiveness in fulfilling its key objectives. This is because of the enviable position of The Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, in meeting the entertainment needs of the University of Ibadan community and the promotion of drama and theatre education and profession in Nigeria.

The paper looks at various management theories including the "Modern System theory", "Human Relations theory", "Ivory Tower Management theory", as well as the "X and Y Management Theory". However, it dwells more on the two models of 'Best Practice' and 'Best Fit' and how they contribute to management of academic theatre in an efficient and effective way. The paper identifies various best practices in the management of academic theatres in different parts of the world. It also highlights the limitations of the 'Best Practice' model in organizational management. In order to take care of the shortcomings of the 'Best Practice' model, the paper examines the 'Best Fit' model and discusses the usage of its five tools in diagnosing, strategizing, monitoring and sustaining the growth and development of the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan. While prescribing strategies aimed at taking advantage of the benefits of the Internet Age, the paper recommends the 'Best Fit' model for the management of the Arts Theatre University of Ibadan in order to ensure its even growth and development as well as sustaining the ideals of its founding fathers.

The Arts Theatre University of Ibadan: An Introduction

The University of Ibadan Arts Theatre is the foremost academic theatre in Nigeria. It was established in the year 1955 as the first modern Nigerian theatre. It launched the University Travelling Theatre in 1961. Since its inception, the Arts Theatre has served as a laboratory for staff and student productions and a home to many cultural activities from within and outside the university community (Adedokun, 1997:88). The Arts Theatre also played host to various theatrical performances both from the academia and the professional theatre groups, including international theatre troupes visiting Nigeria from other parts of the world.

During its glorious era, the Arts Theatre made a favourable impact on the community and the travelling theatre troupes in a very significant way. It contributed greatly to the theatre-going tradition in Ibadan, provided optimum theatrical experience through its resident troupes at different periods: the University of Ibadan Travelling Theatre (1961), The Acting Company (1968), University Theatre Arts Company (1970), Unibadan Masques (1974/75), Unibadan Performing Company (1980), as well as the University of Ibadan Theatre Arts Troupe (1986-88 and 1997-98). In terms of practical achievement, the University of Ibadan participated and won several awards for the country in many international drama festivals including Senegal in 1966, France in 1967, Algeria in 1968 as well as the USA in 1970, 1981 and 1982[1]. The Arts Theatre also supported various dramatists from different parts of the country in their play productions. The extent of its influence on theatre practice in Nigeria is well documented by various Theatre, Drama and Performing Arts students from different parts of the country in their projects and theses.

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[1] Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan (2003) *2002/2003 Brochure.* Pg.422

With these laudable antecedents, it is not out of place to pause for a while and ask whether the Arts Theatre is still sustaining its erstwhile popularity as a haven of entertainment for the University of Ibadan community. Is it still making a favourable impact on the professional and community theatre practitioners? Is the Arts Theatre still relevant in the face of constant threat by other entertainment outfits within and outside the institution as well as constant progression of information communication and technology and its tremendous impact on the entertainment and culture industry? Is it still a crowd pulling edifice it used to be in the past? What then is the current status of the Arts Theatre in terms of management?

Answers to the aforementioned questions are not far-fetched. Things are rapidly changing. The Arts Theatre no longer enjoys the monopoly it has in the past as many universities in the country now have their own theatre structures. Apart from that, the Arts Theatre has lost its connecting cord with the ancient city of Ibadan through which it made a significant impact on theatre-going tradition in the city. The unquantifiable contribution of its resident troupes in the past is being greatly missed by the present generation, creating a sense of nostalgia in those who were actively involved in its operation. To address all these shortcomings, therefore, a pro-active strategy in the management of the Arts Theatre which will enable it to perform its statutory functions, regain its lost glories, and improve on its responsiveness to the wishes and aspirations of its various stakeholders, is inevitable. These stakeholders include theatre students, theatre scholars and professionals, theatre administrators, the Theatre Arts Department, as well as the most significant group of stakeholders for the theatre – the general audience.

A significant area of concern for this paper is the fact that "live theatre is fast losing its audience and has been doing so since the 60's. The reasons for this loss could range from socio-

economic factors to advances in technology (Asigbo & Dandaura, 1999: 51). However, one may ask whether the Arts Theatre as an academic theatre is under the same commercial pressure being faced by the professional theatre. Does a non-profit theatre need to worry about poor attendance at its shows when the owner of the theatre is quite different from the producers of the plays? These are burning questions that necessitated this paper. Our own view is that, being an academic theatre and a non-profit making theatre at that, the Arts Theatre needs to evaluate the extent to which it is meeting the objectives of its founding fathers. If we are satisfied with the result, then we should maintain the standard. But if we are not satisfied, we should endeavour to re-appraise and re-strategise for optimum result.

Apart from that, as a pioneer academic theatre in the country and one that is located in the historically strategic city of Ibadan, the Arts Theatre should remain an enviable structure, and a thing of pride for all who have contributed in one way or the other to its sustainability. Since we are in a rapidly changing world, there is a need for constant evaluation of what we are doing and how we are doing it in order to get results that match the universal pace of development. In terms of physical structure, the Arts Theatre has been renovated and now wears a new look. This is thus the right time for us to ensure that the physical transformation is complemented with a new administrative approach to enhance its functionality. We will, in the process, be putting new wine in a new wine-skin and thus facilitate a holistic institutional rebirth. Also, being the foremost academic theatre in Nigeria, it is imperative for the Arts Theatre to continue to provide a scalable model for other academic theatres both within and outside Nigeria. These and many other reasons necessitated the search for a management approach that will repackage its operation and improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

Theatre Management: An overview

"Theatre management is the business end of a theatre which is responsible for facilitating the day-to-day operation of the theatre towards fulfilling its mission" (Voltz, 2007:1). Also, "it is the art of running the operations and activities of a theatre company or a theatre building" (Adedokun, 2008:3). This means that theatre management is an art because it demands creativity, knowledge of human relation as well as the ability to communicate effectively within and outside the confines of the theatre. It is also a serious business of selling the theatre products, even in a non-profit theatre like that of the Arts Theatre, in a self sustaining manner.

In the light of these definitions, it is necessary to reappraise the management of the Arts Theatre to see how it can improve on its internal and external human relations, audience drive, improvement in quality of productions and resource mobilization strategy towards self-sufficiency. Such re-appraisal will also enable it to chart the way forward in fulfilling its mission to the department, the university community and the wider society.

Management Theories and Practices

In order to determine the best management approach for the Arts Theatre in the face of current realities, we wish to examine here some of the well-known management theories and practices. These include the Modern System Theory (Cummings, 1986:10), the Human Relations Theory (Kumar, 2005:14), the Ivory Tower Management Theory (Hill & Jones, 2001:18) as well as the X and Y Theory, (McGregor, 2002:132).

The Modern System Theory which is traceable to the General System Theory as propounded by Ludwig von Bertlanffy (Kumar, 2005:6) sees an organisation or an institution such as a theatre as a complex machine which is influenced by its formal and informal structures, technological advancement and environmental

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factors. Thus, the organization has to take into consideration the dynamics of these various discrete yet indivisible parts, while developing its management agenda. The Human Relations Theory, on the other hand, holds that the degree of motivation of various actors in an organisational structure will determine its efficiency and effectiveness. This means that the management of an organisation is more about motivating both the workforce and the intended audience in order to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness.

The Ivory Tower Management Theory is premised on the assumption that the top level management is all-knowing, and capable of taking every management decision using idealistic approach without touching base with the existing reality in the different units of the organisation. This management option is prone to being counter-productive, capable of resulting in policy somersaults and the taking of bad decisions which, invariably, affect the development of such an organisation. McGregor's X and Y theory is also about motivation. While the X theory assumes that human beings are naturally lazy and hate to work and therefore have to be threatened or intimidated to perform their statutory functions, the Y theory believes that human beings are naturally excited by the joy of having to work and also have the tendency to excel in whatever they do provided an enabling environment is created to motivate them to give of their best.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the management theory one adopts in the running of an organisation or an institution like the Arts Theatre, the ultimate deliverables in management are five-fold. These are: setting 'smart' objectives, planning the use of resources, taking actions towards the implementation of the day to day activities of the organisation, constantly measuring results and finally taking corrective actions towards improved results (Cummings, 1986:199). To achieve all these, the management must work with people and for people. Thus a people-centred

approach is always effective in organisational management. To be able to play all these five roles successfully in the management of the Arts Theatre, we shall look at the 'Best Practice' in the management of various academic theatres and examine those 'best practices' that can be adapted for the Arts Theatre using the 'Best fit' model.

The 'Best Practice' Model

Best practice is all about strategies that have worked and produced the desired results elsewhere which could also be adapted to another situation with the assurance that it would produce the expected results (Kalseth& Cummings, 2001:166). In a holistic manner, 'best practices' can also be described as widely-acceptable approaches, techniques, methods or processes that have proven their effectiveness in accomplishing given tasks and producing desired results. As a management theory, it assumes that there is a universal best way of doing certain things and that these methodologies are replicable, although with the necessary adaptation to peculiar situations. It was made popular by Jeffrey Pfeiffer's 7 Human Resources Practices (Answers.com, 2011:1).

In Theatre management, best practices are the tested and trusted strategies being utilized in the day-to-day running of academic theatres. This principle ranges from the way shows are packaged, the way audiences are attracted into the theatre, the way a developmental programme is put in place, to the way partnership is built for effective running of the theatre.

'Best practices' in the Management of Academic Theatre

We now examine some of the salient features of 'Best Practices' in the management of academic theatres.

Digital Ticketing

In this age of e-marketing and e-payment, many academic theatres are using the online technology to sell tickets to their prospective audience. In the name of being eco-friendly and reducing the need for the use of paper whenever it can be avoided, theatre now employs a ticketing tool readily accessible online. The customer pays online using his credit or debit card and is given a coded number. It is this number that he presents at the entrance where the box office manager checks his computer, confirms his payment and admits him into the theatre. This reduces the time that the customer spends purchasing the ticket and the amount that the theatre company spends on sending the ticket by mail to those who make advance booking. Apart from that, the amount that the theatre company might have spent on the printing of tickets is saved while it is easy to track income of the theatre without much trouble since everything is done electronically. Digital ticketing is practised by Kansas State University. The CHAMS Theatre Series also employed this strategy when it moved the annual CHAMS Theatre Series out of the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan to the Cultural Centre. Show houses in Lagos like MUSON Centre, and Silver Bird Cinema, are also employing the digital ticketing option.

Visibility through Theatre-owned website

Many academic theatres now own websites and adequately publicize such websites through website launch, linkages with other websites that have high potential audience traffic, linkages to the institution's official websites as well as linkages with popular drama and theatre related websites. This has enhanced the visibility of such theatres, improved their audience reach, and made booking a lot easier. Getting feedback from their audience on almost a daily basis has also become very simple.

Publicity through Social Media Network

Many academic theatres are taking advantage of the popularity of the Internet and related technology to connect to a wider audience. This is illustrated by the usage of social media networks like the Facebook, Tweeter or Blogging to reach out to their audience particularly the youth. This has proved to be effective because of its interactive nature. Youths can be effortlessly reached with adequate information concerning upcoming shows in the theatre. They can also make enquiries and do their booking via these media. With that, access to the theatre is brought closer to their fingertips. To know which play is running, by who and for what price as well as making reservations, can all be done anywhere at any point in time (while in bed, on the road etc.) as long as they have access to the Internet via computer console, or they have their Blackberry, I-Pod, I-Pad, or other smart phones on them. Since most phones nowadays come with Internet facility, it has become a veritable tool for meeting the potential audience in an inter-personal way similar to, but more effective than, verbal communication. The Bethel University Academic Theatre, Arden Hills, Minnesota, United States, currently employs this strategy to good effect.

Student Drama Festival

Although packaging student drama festival may not be an innovation in itself, the way it is being carried out in different places and the results it achieves makes it to qualify as best practice. For example, in some universities in Europe and America, students from the same country or continent constitute themselves into a drama group and compete among themselves. It is usually a colourful drama festival which attracts a lot of publicity and huge attendance. There are prizes to be won in different categories and the audience always looks forward to such festivals. In most cases,

tickets for all the presentations are sold out long before the festival begins.

In Ghana, to take another instance elsewhere, good productions from the students' practical examinations are selected for the student drama festival. Its uniqueness lies in the amount of publicity which it attracts both on radio and television. For about a month prior to the festival, advertisements on the festival are aired at least ten times a day based on partnership arrangement with the broadcasting stations. Due to this huge publicity, many corporate organisations have bought in into the programme, sponsoring it, and offering prizes in different categories.

Corporate Branding of various Theatre Products

Theatre managers in academic theatres partner regularly with corporate organisations whose products enjoy students' patronage. Such organisations are companies branding theatre products such as backdrops, programme notes, tickets as well as theatre walls both interior and exterior. These companies and organisations pay the theatre an agreed sum of money for this. While this is an income generating option for the theatre, it is also a publicity strategy for the organisations as they use the platform of the theatre in the academic environment to reach their prospective customers including students and other members of the community.

Suffice it to say here that what is regarded as a best practice is expected to provide the desired results in any theatre provided all variables remain constant. However, experience has shown that, more often than not, best practices do not always work across board because of differences in situations, environmental factors and many other peculiarities. That is why many believe that adopting some of the 'best practices' may not be fully effective if one fails to adapt it to one's own specific context. It is this failure of the best practice model in some quarters and the quest for an

effective and reliable model that will facilitate efficiency and effectiveness that gave birth to the 'Best Fit' model.

The 'Best Fit' Model

The 'Best Fit' Model is an evidence-based process in which an organisation/institution makes a conscious effort to identify the best management approach needed to guide the day-to-day running of its operation. It is similar to 'The Modern System Theory' which "sees each organisation as a complete whole, influenced by its formal and informal structure, external conditions, technological factors and the individual personalities of its employee" (Cummings, 1986:10). The similarity lies in the fact that it takes into consideration the variables within and outside the organisation before deciding on the best approach to be adopted in the management of the theatre to suit its own peculiarities. The 'Best Fit' model is traceable to Harvard, Michigan and New York models (Morris & Maloney, 2011:2).

The 'Best Fit' Tools

In order to arrive at the 'best fit' management style in the day-to-day running of a theatre, it is imperative for certain tools to be in place to assist in making informed decisions with regard to theatre operation. Since it is an evidence-based process, using the tools will provide the management with ample information that will serve as a guide in the progress and direction of the theatre. The relevant tools are as follows:

- ➢ Stakeholders' analysis
- ➢ Knowledge Management
- ➢ Environmental Scanning
- ➢ Strategic and Operational Plan
- ➢ Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

Knowledge Management

Knowledge management is facilitating the effective use of an organisation's knowledge about its past, and its ability to learn from past experiences (Kalseth and Cummings, 2001: 163). This tool is used to identify what has worked in the past and why it worked. It can be used to identify success stories, challenges of the past, traditions and innovations of the past and how they have helped the organization or institution to grow to what it is in the present. To utilise this tool; the Arts Theatre would rely essentially on lecturers that have been in the department for upwards of two to three decades, past alumni that are still 'touching base' and have sentimental attachment to the Arts Theatre, non-academic staff who have worked in the Arts Theatre in the past and veteran callers. These categories of people are regarded as 'institutional memories' and they can provide information on what worked in the past and why. This information will assist a lot in determining what can still work in the present dispensation.

Environmental Scanning

Environmental scanning is a tool that enables decision makers to understand the external environment and the interconnections of its various sectors and to translate this understanding into the institution's planning and decision-making processes. It also means turning prevailing environmental and technological factors into advantage (Morrison, 2006: 86-99). Results of environmental scanning have assisted many organizations to be proactive, develop their own niches, consistent with prevailing trends, and also significantly meet the ever-changing needs and expectations of their stakeholders.

To do this effectively, the Arts Theatre can shortlist organisations providing services similar to its own and what they are doing, identify points of similarity and dissimilarity in

programmes, socio-economic and political challenges of the day as well as various technological advancements (mobile phones, the Internet, the social media, etc) that have significant impact on Arts Theatre activities. This administrative tool should thus provide information on the most critical trends and developments capable of affecting the running of the day-to-day activities of the Arts Theatre. Based on the findings from stakeholders' analysis and knowledge management, the Arts Theatre can then identify what it should be doing that will be unique to it and give it its niche.

Strategic and Operational Plans

While the previous tools are essentially analytical tools to assist the Arts Theatre in making informed decision with regard to what it should be doing and how it should be doing it, the Strategic and Operational plan as well as Monitoring and Evaluation plan are the working tools which break the thought process and overall scheme into actionable and manageable steps. For the avoidance of doubt, a strategic plan is a plan that is anticipatory and forward-looking but one that is also able to look back and learn from the past. "It determines where an organization is going over the next year or more, how it's going to get there and how it'll know if it got there or not (McNamara, 2011: Par 1). An operational plan, on the other hand, is a detailed short-time plan formulated to translate strategic plan into specific activities.

The strategic plan to be drafted may be a three- to five-year plan which shows the direction the Arts theatre should be going within that period, while the operational plan is an annual plan which states what will be expected from the different units of the Arts Theatre on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. It will include activities which ensure that documentation is properly done, the strong partnership is built and adequate resources for the running of the theatre are mobilised, in addition to ensuring that only quality plays capable of attracting high patronage are allowed

take place at the Arts Theatre. One critical factor in the use of these plans is the fact that they must be target-specific. What should be achieved by each of the units annually in terms of deliverables would be identified and documented in the plan to be able to guide and motivate the units into action towards achieving the set target.

The elements of a strategic plan include overall goal (for 3-5 years), and objectives that will lead to the achievement of the goal. These objectives must conform to the 'SMART' analysis of being specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. The strategic plan also highlights what will be done to achieve the objectives, by whom, when and at what cost as well as the strategic results expected from each of the units. The elements of the operational plan, on the other hand, are translations of the strategic objectives into day-to-day activities in each of the units, the annual target for each of the units, the required income and expenditure for each of the units, ensuring that the expenditure will not exceed the income.

Some of the benefits of having both the strategic and operational plans include giving a sense of direction to the organisation's work; providing platform for measuring progress, success, failures and shortcomings in relation to the set targets and providing opportunities for evaluation of what is being done and how well, from time to time. Other benefits include increase in commitment to programme implementation and improvement in task delivery as staff become clearer about their roles and responsibilities. The plans also provide justification for funds and resource allocation and utilization. Considering the fact that the development of a strategic plan is time consuming and may demand significant resources, the Arts Theatre can buy into the University of Ibadan Five-Year Strategic Vision to derive its specific strategic objective and goal. This means that the Arts Theatre could start with the annual result-based operational plan

guided by the identified strategic vision as well as all other information gathered using the 'best fit' model.

Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

Monitoring is a systematic and continuous process of collecting and analysing information on outputs, costs, human resources, and implementation time frame, to ensure the plan is being executed appropriately, while evaluation is a systematic process of collecting and analysing information to measure the level of achievement and determine the degree of impact the programme has had on the target population (Palena, Le Ngoc, and Mustafa, 2008:125). To a layman, monitoring is keeping track of daily implementation of activities through a systematic collection and collation of information as a project progresses, to ensure that activities are being implemented as planned. Monitoring is thus based on targets set and activities projected during the planning phase of the work. It helps to keep the work on track, and can alert management to any negative development.

Evaluation, on the other hand, is the comparison between what was set out to be achieved at the beginning of the plan period and what was eventually achieved as at the time of evaluation, which could be either at the end of the year or at the end of the plan's cycle. It looks at what an organisation sets out to accomplish, what it eventually accomplishes and how. It enables the organisation to determine whether its 'best fit' truly fits or whether there is a need to review it.

Challenges of 'Best Fit' Model

While the 'best fit' model is very comprehensive and can assist in making informed decision because it is evidence-based it, however, comes with its own daunting challenges. It may be time-consuming if not well managed. It also needs strong commitment and dedication of the management to create time and allocate

resources to it. Apart from that, because it is a participatory model, the process of reaching consensus on issues may take time if not well facilitated. Another challenge is the availability of relevant expertise. The fact is that the 'best fit' model is like a tool box with relevant tools for fixing the problems. However, the tool in itself cannot fix a problem unless the craftsman or the mechanic knows how to use the tools. Thus, it requires competent hands who already know the art of 'fixing' to be able to make a huge success of it. It is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. It is, nevertheless, a necessary and significant means.

Benefits of 'Best fit' Model

The model provides valuable and useful information on 'what to do', 'who to do it', and 'how to do it' in order to facilitate optimum performance of an organisation in every particular circumstance. With regard to our case study, the model, if applied, will enable the Arts Theatre to be expressly responsive to the different needs of its stakeholders. It will serve as a motivating factor and a propelling force for efficient and effective running of the Arts Theatre since it is target-driven. It will provide opportunity for the review of institutional objectives in the face of current realities and also guarantee the achievement of the set objectives. Furthermore, it will increase the visibility of the Arts Theatre and its activities. It can ensure that the Arts Theatre is self-sufficient and can also provide the needed guidelines for staff, students and audience with regard to the day-to-day running of the theatre.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper we have been able to discuss the management of the Arts Theatre from a prescriptive point of view. We looked at various management theories and dwelled on the Best Practices Theory and the Best Fit Theory. We explained what the two theories are and also gave few examples of best practices in the

management of academic theatres. We expatiated on the best fit model development process as well as the tools needed to be able to arrive at the best management and operational option for the Arts Theatre. We also identified the challenges and benefits of adopting the 'best fit' model so as to give the Arts Theatre a tremendous boost as an academic theatre providing state of the arts services in line with current realities. Thus, its audience base will invariably expand, and it will also enhance its capacity to provide a scalable model for other academic theatres the world over. It is our belief that if efforts are made in this direction, it will improve the Arts Theatre operation, the quality of productions as well as its visibility within and outside its immediate environment.

In the light of the above, we hereby make the following recommendations towards repositioning the Arts Theatre for the challenges of the twenty-first century:

1. The Department of Theatre Arts University of Ibadan through the Arts Theatre Management Committee should initiate the process of developing a 'best fit' operational plan for the Arts Theatre.

2. A 3-man facilitating team should be constituted to select representative of stakeholders for the process, develop relevant agenda, facilitate the conduct of stakeholders' analysis and knowledge management in conjunction with the Arts Theatre institutional memories. The committee should conduct environmental scanning with the stakeholders, and also develop relevant templates for the operational plan as well as the monitoring and evaluation plan, as earlier prescribed.

3. The focus of the proposed plans should include increased patronage of Arts Theatre productions, improvement in the quality of productions staged in the Arts Theatre, resuscitation of the resident troupe, collaboration with

theatre practitioners outside the university environment as well as increased visibility of the Arts Theatre locally and internationally, among other objectives.

4. On completion of the development process, the Arts Theatre Management Committee should ensure adherence to the implementation of the plan, through tracking of the monitoring plan, and conducting the end-of-year evaluation of the plan, as a basis for subsequent activities.

With these documents in place, and the active participation of all stakeholders including the Arts Theatre workforce, as well as careful tracking of activities, the efficiency and effectiveness of the Arts Theatre will be guaranteed and our hope of a virile, self-sustaining academic theatre will become a reality.

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