
CULTIVATING CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

Kayleigh 0:00

We've all been there, justifying our creative job to Mum and Dad; explaining what our job is to Grandad; brushing off jokes about freelancing from our mate who works in finance. But times are changing, and the value of creativity is being recognised. The creative industries are the fastest growing part of the UK economy, and the least likely jobs to be taken over by robots. I'm Kayleigh Mcleod and this is 'Get a Proper Job', where I'll be talking about the issues that matter.

Sita Thomas 0:31

We can always look at inspiring, cultivating leadership, at whatever level it's at. I like it when I can really believe in someone! Like....wow! I absolutely believe in you because everything that you say publicly and internally is backed up by actual action.

Kayleigh 0:50

In today's episode, we'll be exploring the topic of leadership and the creative and cultural industries with Gillian Mitchell and Dr Sita Thomas.

Hello, and welcome! In today's episode, we're talking leadership in the creative and cultural industries, and I'm delighted to be joined by Gillian Mitchell; Chief Executive of National Youth Arts Wales and Dr Sita Thomas; who's a Theatre Maker, Channel 5 Milkshake Presenter, Artistic Director of Fio, a Creative Associate at Wales Millennium Centre, and a Trustee at the Young Vic Theatre and Emergency Exits Arts.

Welcome to you both! Thanks for joining us.

Gillian 1:34

Thank you.

Kayleigh 1:35

It's really fab to get to chat to you.

As our listeners might hear, we're still working from home. So, we're recording this, our third series of 'Get a Proper Job', remotely. As with the last series, apologies in advance if you hear any sounds of our home life in the background. This ongoing global pandemic has forever altered the world of work, particularly in the creative industries and so over these next few episodes, we're looking to explore what that means for creatives and for their careers.

Leadership, as we know, is a really broad topic with lots of nuances. So today, we're focusing in on the leadership journeys of our guests and discussing creative and cultural leadership here in Wales. So, Gillian, can you kick us off by telling us a little bit about your

career and as Chief Executive of a National Organisation what does your current role involve?

Gillian 2:27

Yeah, oh my goodness, my career? That's really hard! I've been around for so long it's hard for me to remember when it all started! But as you can probably tell from my accent, I'm not native to Wales, although currently Chief Executive in Wales and Wales is my home. I started off my career in Northern Ireland where I lived until five years ago, and I pretty much started working in the creative and cultural sector in Northern Ireland, straight out of university. I've had all sorts of roles.

I started off, I suppose in what we used to call entry level jobs, and then through a series of (when I look back, it looks like it was a plan, but it wasn't at the time) because that kind of journey ended up with where I am now as Chief Executive of National Youth Arts Wales. One of the biggest things I suppose I did in Northern Ireland in terms of really cutting my teeth over a very long period of time, it has to be said, is that I helped lead and co-lead the 20 million Prime Capital project, a venue which is known as The Mac, and I was able to kind of get involved in that very early on in my career.

I think it was significant that I was quite young, still in my 20s when that started, and I felt like it was 65 by the time I had finished with everything that went on! But I think, when I look back, that's been quite significant in terms of to develop as a leader, and really honed my attitude to risk taking and to work with teams, to work with others. Youth was a significant part of that. Because I think if I'd known at the start what I knew at the end of all the kind of many challenges I may not have gone down that road. But it's kind of stood me in good stead.

I've taken what I've learned through to every job that I've had since then, currently as Chief Executive of National Youth Arts Wales, which I joined in 2018 as a new organisation that had been set up just six months before. And, National Youth Arts Wales, like a lot of creative organisations, even before COVID has gone through a huge amount of change. So, I think as Chief executive, my role has been since I joined and continues to be (because of the pandemic) to kind of help manage that change to make sure that the organisation continues to do what it's always done, which is to serve the most gifted and talented young people in the arts in Wales.

Kayleigh 4:52

I think that's a really concise way of describing your job role. And I really loved what you said there about looking back maybe there was a plan, but there wasn't a plan. I'm sure a lot of our listeners can understand that and appreciate that point of view as well.

Sita, from that introduction, we can tell that you currently wear a few different hats. What's been your career journey? Can you tell us a bit about it?

Sita 5:15

Yeah, I do indeed wear many different hats and I think we could have just gone for one of those job titles. But actually, at the moment, I'm really excited to be celebrating people who are kind of multifaceted and do quite a lot of different things. I'm thinking about, especially for the next generation of creative people, I think it's a real thing that we should celebrate. And as I've been growing in my journey to this day, as a new Artistic Director, often people have told me to just do one thing - you just need to be a director if you want to direct. And I'm really glad that I've kind of resisted that and kept all of the passions that I have going, and I've aimed to get as good as I possibly can and strive to excel in each of those different facets.

It all began in Pembrokeshire, in West Wales where I was born and bred. And it was engagement with Youth Arts that really started my journey: I loved to dance. I went to my local Youth Theatre, (Torch Theatre). I was a member of National Youth Theatre of Wales and National Youth Dance Wales and then at the age of 16, I actually left Wales and that was in pursuit of more artistic opportunities.

So I went to a Performing Arts Sixth Form college, and then I started my academic journey which went from my undergrad in English Literature and Theatre Studies to my Master's in Movement Direction. To then straight into a PhD, where I was examining issues of cultural diversity in the performance of Shakespeare in the UK. After that, it was really a shift in focus to Directing and pretty quickly turning that into being an artistic leader. I think the quest for me has been about... I love to do what I do and direct, but I really want to be part of systemic, sustained long term change in the cultural sector and it felt like being an artistic leader was the opportunity to enact that.

So that's brought me to here today, and it's so nice to be chatting to Gillian, because we recently had our first collaborative, creative meeting as artistic leaders together, and it's an honour to be on the podcast together.

Kayleigh 7:19

Oh, that's fantastic! To bring everyone together, again, and to have this discussion about leadership.

I mean, Gillian, what does leadership mean to you when we say that word? And what sort of qualities do you think make a good leader, especially in the creative and cultural industries?

Gillian 7:35

It's so hard to distil it down isn't it? I mean, it's changed so much. As I said, I've been around for a while in the creative and cultural sector and I think things have changed a lot. I was really interested in what Sita was talking about in terms of being advised to just do one thing and if she wanted to be an artistic director, just be an artistic director. I think in terms of Creative Leadership in its narrowest sense, I think that's one of the big things that have changed. For me whenever I started off, particularly in a more kind of artistic role within the arts, it was just at the end, I think, of a leadership style, where there was an artistic leader or

an artistic director for a venue or a company. It was kind of more of a single auteur of their vision. And I was stepping into the role as an artistic leader that time, and really beginning to wonder if people would take me seriously because I hadn't studied a theatre degree, I hadn't studied drama, I hadn't studied dance, I hadn't kind of come from a single art form.

But what I had been involved in was a very inclusive (in a traditional sense) approach to giving artists opportunities, because I was working in a really small venue that was set up for that purpose and kind of given free rein to do that. But as I kind of moved into a role where I was going into bigger venues, and then I think things changed, thankfully, around that time as I was really starting to develop in those kinds of roles. I think the idea of creative producers got more currency and I think there's been a greater understanding to where we are now, and it is about being able to kind of bring lots of different experiences to your role.

Obviously, one of the big changes I think, is the pandemic that's been kind of a big part of this. It is not only about my experience but about all different experiences. So, I think there's been kind of quite a lot of changes in the creative sector. Definitely more needed. But I think that valuing a range of experience and not the kind of single vision only being it as I said, that auteur role. I think it's been a big change for the better, I guess.

Kayleigh 9:51

Just taking that on a little bit, in what ways do you think Sita that leadership can be modelled at all different experience levels and in different positions within a company or a network community? Not just those who have an official remit for leadership.

Sita 10:05

Great question! I think everyone can and could be inspired, and even should be a leader in their day to day lives. And I say that having today - just spent the day in a skate park with a group of incredible people of all different ages and skill sets and watching them be leaders in their own way. Whether it's just, you know, a 14-year-old boy helping to share, how to do an 'ollie' on a skateboard, to a really experienced songwriter leading a session and encouraging people to share their talents in terms of creating a song in 20 minutes. So, I love that we can always look at inspiring and cultivating leadership at whatever level it's at. And just for me, in terms of what makes a really good leader, I like it when I can really believe in someone! Like... Wow! I absolutely believe in you because everything that you say publicly and internally is backed up by actual action.

I think the way that I'm approaching this question is like, I've seen lots of people in leadership positions, talk the talk, and then when it comes to it, they are not making those decisions, they are not putting the money where they should be. They're not creating the opportunities where they should be, they're not enacting the change that they should and could be.

So, for me, a good leader commits to everything that they say they will do. And they create an organisational culture from themselves that stems with themselves that is then built and

co-created with the whole team who is part of that culture. And it's an environment where everyone can flourish and be their best selves. And I love what Gillian said about sharing of power actually, that's really, really key with everyone, and empowering everyone to be leaders

Kayleigh 11:50

So much of that resonates with me. Can I just take it on a little bit more Sita, there is a Clore report from August of 2020, which is around leadership. And it says that there's a "...particular need for the sector to consider how it best supports individual leaders who are not necessarily themselves supported by an organisation." So, I guess there, we're talking about freelance leaders?

What are your thoughts in relation to encouraging and developing leadership among freelancers in the creative industry?

Sita 12:18

Brilliant question. Again, there's been such a huge shift in this last year and a half, in terms of mobilising advocacy around freelancers in the sector. I feel like so many – and I was about to say “us”, but I'm no longer a freelancer, and it's the first time in my career that I've not been a freelancer.

We are becoming more and more empowered to set the standards ourselves. Whereas I think freelancers are often at the behest of organisations and their choices and how they create contracts and their timescales. And actually, for freelancers to know what works really well for them how they do their best work in their best jobs, being able to set that standard, and for organisations to get behind that. So having spent over 10 years as a freelancer, I'm so excited now as an Artistic Director to be able to shift the culture of our company to ensure that we're supporting freelancers best.

But to come back to your question about freelancers and leadership... what was the report about? Because I've come from being a freelancer, and I'm now a leader. Are you're talking about freelancers becoming leaders of companies? Or where's the question headed...?

Kayleigh 13:25

Oh a question back to me! That's amazing.

Yeah, we picked up the Clore Leadership Survey because it concluded that there was a clear indication that the Global Pandemic was having an impact on the Arts and Culture sector, both budgets and the workforce. While there's a clear understanding of the needs for quality leadership to help guide the sector through the turbulence caused by COVID-19 and additional issues such as diversity, equality, environmental sustainability. The report recognises that there's limited resources to invest in professional development – and that's people within organisations.

So, I suppose my question was, for you, asking a bit more about the freelance workforce as part of the arts and culture sector, and maybe what more could be done to support their leadership development needs?

Sita 14:12

I'm just going to take one element from that because there's so much in it! But in terms of limited resources for professional development, and how we can cultivate the next generation of really diverse leaders. Okay, this is a really big one and I think it's something that we really need to do a lot more of in Wales specifically.

The only reason that I'm an Artistic Director now at this stage of my career is because I was lucky enough to be part of professional development projects, as you've just mentioned, when I was living in London. So, there was an Arts Council England funded 18-month project that was called 'Up Next' and it was led by Artistic Director of The Future (a charity). It placed three trainee artistic directors at the Bush Theatre and three at Battersea Arts Centre and so we were there, as trainee artistic directors we got to soak up everything that those leaders in both organisations were doing. And if you look at us cohort of six people... all of us are now leaders. It really works. And we were all from really diverse backgrounds.

And we are part of this percentage shift that needs to grow and grow and grow and has been really growing in terms of the diversity, I'd say much more so in England. I've come back to Wales, specifically because of the lack of diverse representation in leadership positions. There was a town hall discussion during the pandemic, during lockdown, that was built up as 'Come and listen to all of the artistic leaders in Wales'. And so, I came along, and every single person on that panel was white and there were like, 12 people there. I just went, there's nobody who looks like me, there's nobody who represents me yet everybody there is talking about their commitment to diversity. And honestly, it filled me with such a fire to go: "I have to come back and be part of that shift".

So, I look around, and I don't see any opportunities like 'Up Next'. I don't see any opportunities for professional development. To get that next generation of people into these positions, you can just look at the stats; who's there? Who's there!? We can do a lot more. And that's just about investment and programs and watch this space... because I'm here to make them happen.

Kayleigh 16:23

That is amazing to hear. And yet it sounds like it's really needed and that there'll be lots of movements towards that going forward board.

Gillian, in terms of the sector progression there around leadership and workforce development. Have you seen that over the last couple of years? And do you think that that's impacted negatively by COVID in terms of budgets? Or has it been impacted positively by COVID, in terms of people wanting to develop themselves more as leaders?

Gillian 16:48

I think that there's... as Sita said – there's a lot more to be done. But I think there's at least a recognition of the fact that particularly in Wales, there needs to be more formal ways of creating future leaders or developing leadership roles. I kind of got to where I am by other people around me giving me an opportunity, even though I've always tried to do that in an informal way myself in Northern Ireland, I suppose. Certainly, Northern Ireland was not when I was there and continues to be ethnically diverse at all, in terms of its leadership. But I suppose one thing that did change while I was working in the arts there is the social background of a lot of the leaders, whereas I come from an unashamedly working-class background, and a lot of the leaders in Northern Ireland in the arts do to, which is a good thing.

So, I think there is a recognition of our journey and that commitment to provide other opportunities to people from similar backgrounds. I think one of the things that I've learned pretty quickly over the last couple of years and has become very pronounced (and the pandemic has shined a spotlight on this) is the kind of time that it takes to provide an informal hand up and support, while it's really important to give, for me to give my time in that way and my support in that way, it's not good enough. And it's not going to accelerate the change that's needed quickly enough.

So I think, just echoing what Sita said about there's a need for much more formal pathways and that diversity that we need in leadership roles. As far as National Youth Arts Wales goes, one of the things that I'm most excited about is what we've been able to do to create those opportunities within our staff teams. Specifically looking at young people under the age of 25, from a whole lot more diverse backgrounds than I come from, and you know, we're very conscious of the fact that we are a white led organisation. I may have come from a very working-class background and have that lived experience but I'm like fairly middle class and what we want to do within National Youth Arts Wales, in terms of creating future leaders is to make sure that we start with our own team and think about how we give power to different forms of knowledge.

So, we're doing that specifically through paid trainee roles, making sure you know, I mean, there's no question that we wouldn't pay people. We try and make those as long term as possible. So, some of our trainee roles are a minimum of nine months right through to a year and a half so that there's a proper opportunity to get lots of different experience and be really embedded in the organisation. Because the upside of National Youth Arts is, being a relatively small organisation, is that everybody has to kind of put their shoulder to the wheel. It's a great opportunity for us as an organisation to make sure that we are doing what we can formally to bring the next generation of leaders through.

But I think over the last year and a half, I've seen us all go in the sector from fear to not knowing if any of us were going to financially survive, to the spotlight being put on Diversity and Inclusion and a number of kind of key issues and us all understanding that in terms of diversity and empowering people, and certainly in terms of what future leadership and wheels might look like - It's not the right thing to do but it's the kind of the smart thing to do

if we want to future proof our sector in Wales. And I think in terms of outside of my staff team, one of the things I absolutely love about being Chief Executive of National Youth Arts Wales is, wherever I go, I always meet someone who is an ex-member of one of the National Youth ensembles. They just get everywhere, which is absolutely fantastic.

And I can see a lot of them now in positions of power and decision-making: government level or you know, high up in law or wherever, and obviously, in the creative sector. But all the other kind of softer skills they need to be good humans - I mean, they're all good humans - but how they kind of might carry that forward, if they decide, you know, to be with us as a member of National Youth Theatre Wales or National Youth Orchestra Wales. They could go into a leadership role in the future in any field, not just the creative industries. What we can do, is help with the softer skills around leadership, and particularly empowering young people from more diverse backgrounds to try and engineer some more of that change that is much needed and Wales.

Kayleigh 21:19

Yeah, and I think that idea of transferable skills across leadership, you know, so they can go into different industries, different sectors - hopefully not leaving Wales, we'd love to keep all of that great creative leadership here.

We're almost out of time and I feel like I could listen to you both all day. But I just want to end on this question. You've both worked outside of Wales so I'm interested to hear what your perspective is on how leadership in the creative industries here could develop in the future.

'Chwarae Teg' in the leading charity for gender equality here in Wales and its annual State of the Nation report from February, showed a real mixed picture. There was a positive drop in the gender pay gap but that contrasted with a dramatic drop in the number of female public appointments, and then female chair appointments as well. So just wondered if you had any thoughts on if there's more to be done here, around women in leadership?

Gillian 22:15

It's really, really hard at the minute. Seeing a lot of change at the minute is really exciting. But also, there's a lot still more to be done. And it's very hard to talk about change without talking about a perceived hierarchy of needs, because I don't subscribe to that at all. Given that you've asked me specifically about women, I would say that our sector makes it difficult for women to progress and that's kind of the nature of the sector.

In terms of talking from my own experience, I have caring responsibilities, both as a parent, but also, you know, with relatives. The hours that our industry works in can make that really, really difficult and I think that's still a massive issue. And I think so many women drop out at particular stages because of those caring responsibilities, or because there just still is a predominance of you know, when I look around in Wales, it's no different from anywhere else where I still see a predominance of white men in the majority of leadership roles.

I think that we need to really think about how we can crack that. I know for me, I've become focused much more on allowing people to bring their whole selves to work, to work effectively and focus on outcomes or objectives rather than specifically having traditional kind of work routines, or patterns.

That's a very benign way to talk about women in the creative sector. It's not just about work patterns and the 'nine to five'. But there are some really simple things like that, that I think are really easily removed, and people haven't given it enough thought that you can be more flexible in your working life as well as your home life.

And I think that's one of the things that the pandemic has shone a spotlight on: we didn't all need to be present all the time in a particular venue, or in a particular office or in a particular room. That we can be much more flexible, and I think that will help a little bit in terms of empowering women in the workplace.

But going away just briefly from the kind of really basic stuff around working hours and things. I think there is just a confidence issue and a visibility issue. But talking about women, it's the same question, isn't it about diversity. We need to see more of that at the 'Top' in inverted commas, in order to change that at the 'Bottom' and I just don't think we ever need to take our foot off the pedal. I feel it's dangerous for me, particularly when there's so much work to do around diversity to kind of elevate one above the other because we just got to work harder and do better in Wales and elsewhere.

Kayleigh 24:58

Great, thanks for that really thorough answer there.

Sita, do you want to come in on that question? What's your perspective on leadership in the creative industries in Wales and how that might develop in the future, particularly around gender equality and leadership roles?

Sita 25:15

Yes, thank you. Yeah, we really need some really clear reporting to be done and I'm sure some reports exist - and I think we really need to update it like, wouldn't it be the perfect time to commission this research? So how many women; how many queer women; how many women of colour... for me, I'm all of those things. Next time we all speak, we'll have the stats!

And I think in terms of my personal experience, I'm having to shift and present and mould myself in so many different ways, where I'm not always being the full, true, authentic me. I'm being the version of me that I think I need to be to get the job. And I cannot wait for the time where people can just be themselves. So, for example, when I'm in my interviews, my rounds of interviews, by boards with chairs, as has been mentioned, like "to get this job" ... Even in that dynamic! That power dynamic - it's going to be an all-white panel, predominantly male (we're really lucky at Fio to have the incredible Allison Woods as female chair – fantastic!)

But it's like, all of those barriers, we just have to completely dismantle because where someone else might feel incredibly relaxed in that environment, because they're very used to it and they can see themselves represented and reflected. Like, that's instantly going to wake up my fear level, like, I'll lack in confidence in comparison to other people going for that job. So, I have to overcome all of those things, just to get into the kind of same level as other people. And that's why it's just harder, I think, to break through, and we're forever thinking: Okay, we have to be better, we have to be better, we have to... why can't we just, be?

And I think of course, that is just because we are still working in a sector that is upholding these historic structures that have caused discrimination against people, that oppressed people, in so many different ways. As Gillian is saying, in all of those ways. So, we have to dismantle those barriers at every single level on all of these pathways. And it starts at the beginning, and it never, ever stops.

I think boards is a really, really important thing to do as well. Let's examine all of the boards across Wales. Let's start Youth Boards! So, I've been really lucky to be at the start of The Youth Collective for Wales Millennium Centre and that has been so brilliant. To be with these young people who have that experience now. They're ready to step onto a board right now! Let's get these young people onto boards. Let's just do that.

Please, everyone listening, like just become an advocate! Be your own leader in whatever position, whatever field you're in, and the change that you want to see, it starts with the conversation, and then we take action together. So, we all need a huge white piece of paper, look at the pathway, write down every single barrier, and then work together to just remove those. And I think people have talked about it for so long. But it hasn't worked because look at the people in leadership positions today... It's not diverse enough, not only in terms of gender, but in terms of so many more things. So again, let's get to work.

Kayleigh 28:23

Let's do some action lead change, I think that's what we're saying here and I feel like with both of you at the realms of organisations, you know, things are moving and changing. And like I said, there's lots of opportunities going forward.

I'm actually totally out of time now but I'm going to ask really quickly if you could give us a quick recommendation for our listeners because we believe in passing on knowledge and learning to the community. So, if you've got a resource that's either about creative careers, or how to feel more creative, more inspired, how to make changes... that could be a podcast, it could be a YouTube channel, it could be a book or a website and what we'll do is we'll put that in the show notes and we'll share it with our listeners. So, can I go to Gillian for a recommendation?

Gillian 29:08

Yeah, I think this is probably something that I don't do enough of, but one of the people that in the last year that I try and listen to a lot is Baljeet Sandhu from The Lived Experience

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Movement, because I find that she has some really interesting things to say that I find incredibly useful.

Kayleigh 29:30

Great thank you, and Sita?

Sita 29:32

The first one is Jude Kelly who is a massive inspiration to me as an Artistic Leader so have a listen to Desert Island Discs - really great interview to listen to her journey and secondly, get yourself to the Privilege Cafe.

Kayleigh 29:46

Agreed 100%. Fab recommendations there from both of you! As I say we'll pop the link in the show notes so that our community can check those out too, as well as the reports that we've referenced throughout the conversation today.

Thank you so much Sita and Gillian for joining me today.

Sita 30:05

Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

Gillian 30:07

Thank you. It's great and lovely to have another conversation with Sita. It's always exciting.

Kayleigh 30:13

I feel like there's another like three podcasts in this. Maybe next season we'll come back and do more!

Thanks to everyone at home for listening. We'd love to hear what you think about leadership in the creative and cultural industries. Are you a leader? Do you want to be one? What does Cardiff need in our leaders...

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