



PuSh

INTERNATIONAL
PERFORMING ARTS
FESTIVAL

**LITTLE
MOMENTS
THAT SLIPPED
AWAY**

*AN ORGANIZATIONAL REVIEW
OF PUSH: REFLECTING AND
LEARNING FROM THE PAST*

A summary report prepared by NikNaz Kahnamoui
for the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival

On June 22, 2020, the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival announced the elimination of the full-time Associate Artistic Director (AAD) position that had been created approximately a year earlier specifically for the former Interim Artistic Director, who had been with the organization for more than seven years. Earlier that month, the Audience Services Manager who had been with PuSh in a part-time capacity for fifteen years was also let go. Ten days after the announcement, the PuSh Board announced that the organization's Artistic and Executive Director (AED) who had been with the organization for just over a year, was no longer employed by PuSh.

During the months that followed, the PuSh Board and Managing Director personally reached out to many of PuSh's stakeholders to respond to their messages of disappointment and to ask for their input. PuSh proceeded to establish an Advisory Group and invited a few of the individuals who had been vocal about their disappointment to join the Group. They also interviewed a range of consultants with varying competencies to work with the advisory, staff, and board in defining the required work to help the organization move forward.

Recognizing that in order to move forward in a good way, it is essential to examine the past, external facilitators NikNaz Kahnamoui and Camille Dumond designed and facilitated a process to:

- Surface pain points that need to be addressed;
- Support healing and proceed in a good way; and
- Reflect on the past and determine individual and organizational learnings that would help inform rebuilding PuSh.

This process entailed one-on-one interviews with 20 current and former staff and board members¹, a session with current staff, a session with current board members and the managing director, and a debrief with the Advisory Group. This review is not comprehensive in that not all voices are present.

This report outlines the common themes that surfaced during this process. To attempt to understand how PuSh arrived where it is today, it is critical we look beyond the decisions that were made in the spring of 2020. These decisions, while rooted in the values and priorities of the leadership at that time, were also shaped by earlier decisions, patterns of behaviour, and actions or lack thereof—a cascading effect. It looks back with the benefit of hindsight and is informed by multiple perspectives to help us understand the patterns and structures that brought PuSh to this moment, and to inform the path forward.

BACKGROUND

Everyone who has participated in the development of PuSh has come to this work with a great deal of commitment and all their human complexities. If you are coming to this report to identify individuals to blame for what has transpired, you will be disappointed. The crisis at PuSh and how the community responded to it is a microcosm of our world and what is transpiring in the broader context—we are each in a way responsible and we enact those responsibilities within existing structures of power and privilege.

¹ We conducted interviews with 6 former staff, 4 current staff, 4 former board members and 6 current board members. The former AED was not contacted as part of this process as legal proceedings between him and the organization had not yet been finalized at the time of this work. The former Managing Director was also not interviewed.

PuSh is a charitable non-profit, and follows a policy governance model² that distinguishes between the role of the board and that of the operational leadership of the organization. This is the most common model used in the non-profit sector. In this model, the role of the board on behalf of the organization's membership is to focus on setting the strategic directions of the organization and empowering the senior leadership to carry out the operations of the organization in alignment with its mandate.

This is one of the main reasons that during a few critical periods in the past 5 years at PuSh, the board has not stepped in to actively intervene in operational decisions that were under the purview of the senior leader of the organization. Instead the board and board members have acted in an advisory capacity to the organization's leader at the time. Even in situations where the leaders' decision or in/action posed a risk to the health of the organization, the invisible lines separating governance from operations prevented board members from crossing the invisible boundaries between governance and operations. By the same token, staff members have not deemed it appropriate to bypass the organization's senior leader and cross this invisible line to bring their issues to the board.

Interestingly, nowhere in the Societies Act, the bylaws or the policies of the organization, does it state that the board cannot cross this invisible line between governance and operations. Current best practices in the sector require this delineation to allow professional paid staff that are intimately aware of the day-

BOUNDARIES BETWEEN GOVERNANCE AND OPERATIONS

to-day operations specifically in comparison to volunteers who rarely know the intricacies of the organization or even have experience in running non-profits to have operational decision-making powers. If board members of non-profit organizations with professionally paid staff in leadership roles were to step out of their governance space and intervene in an operational decision, many senior leaders of non-profits would find that a boundary violation and unacceptable.

² Bradshaw, P. & Hayday, B. "Non-profit Governance Models: Problems and Prospects". *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, Volume 12(3). 2007.

Over the years, PuSh has continued pushing the boundaries of the art displayed on the stage, increasing the diversity in artistic voices and media, attempting to expand, complicate, and transform its audiences' experiences and understandings. With that, the organization has set itself up for many in the community to assume and expect radical diversity and inclusion practices behind the scenes.

Framing the decision to let go of two women of colour during a global pandemic as a restructuring effort to help maintain the financial health of the organization was not a convincing explanation for the community who had come to expect diversity as a guiding principle of PuSh. The explanation did not align with PuSh's commitment to diversity. What added fuel to the fire was that the announcement came on the heels of an announcement about PuSh hiring another white man, the third in the span of a year.

Some individuals may argue that PuSh was and is not a racist organization that letting go of two women of colour was not due to racism. Internally, diversity has indeed been a guiding value at PuSh and the organization has been practicing liberal non-discriminatory values. The question is whether a commitment to diversity, at a time when there is increased awareness of systemic and institutional racism, is adequate. The question is whether two women of colour would have been let go if PuSh had been an actively and explicitly anti-racist organization. If anti-racism was a core value at PuSh, the organization may have been more invested in supporting the career growth and development of its IBPOC staff, especially when very few arts organizations in Vancouver or perhaps even nationally have women of colour on their senior leadership team.

If PuSh wants to continue entertaining, challenging and pushing the boundaries of its audience's understandings, it needs to align its operational values with those it celebrates on the stage.



Many of our practices and models in the non-profit sector are deeply informed by white supremacy and colonialism. If we do not deliberately question and attempt to be informed by anti-racism, we end up reproducing white supremacist structures and practices.

Not being racist is no longer enough.

Many of these tensions could be attributed to changes in the organization's lifecycle and ownership transitions. In time, these tensions led to a culture of mistrust and faction building among staff, and between staff and board.

As we reflect on what has recently transpired at PuSh it is difficult to not ponder how things may have been different if six years earlier there had been more proactive intervention by the founding AED, the HR committee, or the board, to address the emerging tensions within the organization.

An interview participant acknowledged how in the arts sector people tend to avoid conflict. "Organizations are small, the sector is small, we become friends. We socialize. We also don't let go of people when things aren't working." That seems to have been what transpired at PuSh and in avoiding direct engagement with conflict, the growing conflict and tension only became worse.



**RELATIONSHIP
WITH
CONFLICT**

Over the years and at various times, many board members noticed the tensions among staff but did not feel it was their place to intervene: "these were little moments that slipped away. They seemed inconsequential". Many staff felt it daily but did not feel they had the power to do anything about it: "they were a death by a thousand cuts."

To support PuSh's programmatic growth, the organization's operational and governance structures changed. As in most non-profits with volunteer boards, limited budgets, and underpaid professional staff, these changes were not always in alignment with each other or in alignment with the growing programming needs. Operational leadership transitions that occurred over the past six years, specifically the departure of the administrative and artistic founders, necessitated adjustments to the board's role, with the board shifting from a governance board to a more hands-on operational board and then with the arrival of the most recent AED back to a governance board. Amidst these changes, the organization also experienced a gradual yet continuous shift in its culture and practicing values that eroded trust and created a culture of "us" and "them". A conflict averse leadership style did not proactively address the deteriorating organizational culture which further worsened after the arrival of the new AED. Values of diversity that were progressively displayed on the stage were not actively nor intentionally pursued in the administration of the organization. Underlying all that transpired throughout the years and most specifically during the past year, are the nuts and bolts of a decision-making structure that was problematic; yet, the structure is so well known in the sector—a policy governance model—that it was impossible to problematize it.

SUMMARY

The unraveling at PuSh is an opportune time for the organization to rally the community around defining its vision for the next decade as well as its foundational values, values that underpin its programming as well as its operations. These will help determine the ideal governance and operational structure for PuSh as it re-establishes itself.

- Invest in internal JEDI work.
- Hold a space for healing and coming together of the PuSh family, who we define as former board, and active members (i.e., individuals who have participated in this process) to debrief.
- Aim to recruit 2-3 additional board members as soon as possible.
- Acknowledge all the work you have done individually and as a team, and also the ways in which you may have been harmful to yourselves and each other.
- Pursue relationship repair with former staff.
- Consider conducting a more detailed assessment of your current governance, human resources, financial systems, administrative systems including policies and processes, and programs.
- Build on the current report when engaging with the community as part of the Rally to solicit input on the future of PuSh, its vision, values, and governance and organizational structure.
- Develop an integrated communications strategy and overarching narrative that encompasses the Rally, the Festival and the Organizational Review process.



**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR NEXT
THREE MONTHS**

PUSHFESTIVAL.CA

   @PUSHFESTIVAL