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Eight Adaptive Capacities

BY [RICHARD EVANS, PRESIDENT, EMCARTS INC. \(HTTPS://WWW.ARTSFWD.ORG/AUTHOR/RICHARD-EVANS/\)](https://www.artsfwd.org/author/richard-evans/) / APRIL 18, 2018 /

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These eight adaptive capacities will be further explored in the upcoming webinar series with Richard Evans, "Working Out Your Adaptive Muscles." Learn more and register [here \(http://www.emcartarts.org/programs/webinars\)](http://www.emcartarts.org/programs/webinars) – the first webinar is on May 9th!

These days, it's a volatile, uncertain and complex world out there for the arts. To achieve our goals, it's no longer enough to build on past successes, plan rationally, and bet on the future resembling the past. If we stick with those "steady-as-she-goes" approaches as our way to navigate complexity, success will elude us and, sooner or later, we will fail. As organizational leaders and artists, we need a new mindset and different tools to succeed in these conditions, so we can do more than just react to unpredictable events.

Increasingly, here at EmcArts, we have defined our work in terms of helping individuals, organizations, and communities to develop their capacity to adapt purposefully. But what do we really mean when we talk about "adaptive capacity"?

Briefly, we define adaptive capacity as *the ability to initiate and implement purposeful change in response to shifts in one's operating environment.*

We also like to use the metaphor of capacities as muscles that can be "worked out" in order to strengthen them. In this light, we have used the following definition (also drawing on Brenda Zimmerman's writing on resilience):

The muscles that support the ability to purposefully adapt as circumstances change in a complex manner, where the future is unpredictable. These muscles enable individuals, organizations, and communities to be resilient in a

biological sense, not snapping back to previous forms when stresses are removed, but going forward in those new forms and thriving.

Being resilient means managing the difficult trick of shifting among different practices to suit varying circumstances, rather than getting stuck in one or another set of behaviors. For most, it's the development of adaptive capacities—the capacities that contribute to flexibility, innovation and re-invention—that is most needed.

Our first attempt to actually enumerate these adaptive capacities yielded a list of six. In January of 2017 we brought these to a convening of about 50 leaders in the arts whose organizations had taken part in the EmcArts *Innovation Labs for the Arts* (<https://emcart.org/programs/innovation-labs>), funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and as a result of discussions there, a seventh capacity was added. Subsequent reflection and conversation brought the total to eight. As you can see, we are still very much learning about this ourselves!

Eight Adaptive Capacities

Each *adaptive* capacity is contrasted with an equally valid, but fundamentally different, *stabilizing* capacity. While finding the right balance between these is critical, we find that the need for development of adaptive capacities is often greater. We also include an overarching question related to each capacity.

1. **Questioning ingrained organizational assumptions early and routinely in a change process**

Rather than: Seeking to make change on the basis of established indicators of success

How do we understand what success looks like?

2. **Embracing big new strategic directions, holding them lightly, and being open to influence**

Rather than: Optimizing vision and direction through persistent adherence to a proven approach

How do we open up our mindsets to craft innovative responses?

3. **Creating adventurous cross-functional teams that work outside traditional power structures**

Rather than: Looking to established leaders to make most decisions, while others focus on implementation

How do we disturb prevailing cultural norms?

4. **Bringing multiple network perspectives together to diversify knowledge**

Rather than: Operating primarily based on input from established experts in the area in question

How do we acquire relevant new knowledge?

5. **Encouraging productive tension between ideas to generate multiple new pathways forward**

Rather than: Rigorously resolving all contradictions in order to pursue a single response

How do we develop our initial responses to challenges?

6. **Learning the way forward through repeated experimentation that tolerates extended uncertainty**

Rather than: Planning all new moves in detail in advance, and implementing them in ways that are known to be successful

How do we implement and elaborate our responses?

7. **Making collaboration part of our DNA, internally and externally**

Rather than: Privileging independent action and maintaining strong boundaries, internally and externally

How do we preserve structural flexibility?

8. **Regularly giving things up to shift human and financial resources adaptively**

Rather than: Continuing all initiatives once they're launched, regardless of changes in the world

How do we make space for new ventures?

We believe that the ability to thrive in a rapidly changing world comes from fostering adaptive cultures in our organizations and communities. That means working intentionally to develop our adaptive "muscles" and building new capacities that we can rely on to address the complex challenges we face.

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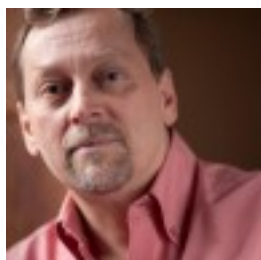
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Richard Evans is the President of EmcArts, where he directs program design, research, and strategic partnerships that place a particular emphasis on innovation, adaptive organization change, and effective ways that the arts and culture field can respond to the demands of a new era.

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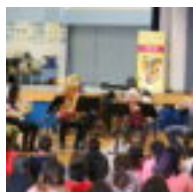
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