

## **Case Study: *CanAsian Dance in Transition*—Exploring Alternative Leadership Models**

Creative Champion Network's *Get on Board: Workshop and Speaker Series* presents a case study on CanAsian Dance. This case study has been informed by meetings and correspondence with CanAsian Dance's board members, as well as the final report by consultants who evaluated CanAsian Dance's impact and explored alternative models of leadership.

Using the following scenario and analyzing the issues presented, members will work together to explore the challenges and opportunities arising from an organization in transitional period.

### **Background**

CanAsian Dance is a recognized organization that supports and presents dance works that engage with Asian practices, ideas, and diasporic experiences. The organization was established in 1997 as a much-needed space that resisted the Eurocentric dominance of the dance sector. It was built to support Asian aesthetics, dance practitioners, and dance practices that reflect and contribute to the cultural fabric of Tkaronto and Canada.

For the past 25 years, the organization has operated under a dual leadership model—the dominant leadership model for non-profit performing arts organizations, both at the time CanAsian Dance began and to the present day. At CanAsian Dance, this model centred around founding Artistic Director Denise Fujiwara and General Manager Adina Herling. Denise and Adina both played critical roles in shaping CanAsian Dance into what it is today.

In 2021, Denise announced that she was retiring. Over the course of its existence, CanAsian Dance—like other marginalized dance organizations in Canada—was so engaged in the labour of defending and articulating its existence in the dance sector that it lacked the capacity to engage in detailed succession planning. Without the luxury of in-depth thinking towards a future, this lack of detailed succession planning resulted in much organizational instability over the following two years.

After Denise's announcement, the Board chose to examine new possibilities for the organization's structural evolution. They decided that a transitional year, where the previous leadership's programming structure was already in place, could benefit from a guest curatorial model. This move was consistent with the organization's history of using guest curatorial models for its festival and sector development initiatives.

CanAsian Dance's year of transition also gave the Board time to engage consultants to confer with the dance community, including the organization's core contributors. The consultant's final report discussed CanAsian Dance's impact and its relationships within communities, and gave an in-depth SWOT analysis (see Appendix B).

Crucially, the report also examined alternative leadership models (see Appendix A). Although the traditional dual leadership model remained under consideration, the Board sought to explore different co-leadership structures and the dynamics contained within them in ways

that can support the organization's evolution and better strengthen its relationships with the communities it services.

### **CanAsian Dance in Transition**

CanAsian Dance wishes to take advantage of the opportunity to restructure its operations in ways that create an informed path forward—one that can more adequately respond to new challenges, realities, and opportunities within the dance sector.

In July 2023, the consultants released their final report, which recommended that in the short term, CanAsian Dance adopt a leadership model comprising an **Artistic Lead and a Curatorial Committee** (see Model 5, Appendix A). This offers a collective model where professionals can come in and out of the curatorial committee, providing different perspectives and adding renewal and generational diversification.

The board has since added the role of a General Manager to this structure, creating a five-person leadership model. This model is new for the organization—and yet it has familiar elements. The Artistic Lead and General Manager roles follow a model of dual leadership, while the three-person curatorial committee continues the organization's history of using guest curatorial models. However, the organization is currently facing challenges in implementing this leadership model, including financial constraints around paying fair wages to five staff while operationalizing artistic visioning and programming.

Nonetheless, it remains that for CanAsian Dance, co-leadership is not about “how many people” but “how we want to work.” Co-leadership is a methodology outside of singular leadership models, and CanAsian Dance is more interested in this distributed leadership than decentralization. While there is a lot of language discussing decentralization in the sector, most structures need a centre of some sort. Moreover, in dance, grounding is a technique that supports the body to be mobile. Organizations also need an ability to “ground”—to have a strong and stable foundation that allows for high levels of adaptability and innovation.

Succession takes time, and for CanAsian Dance, transitioning to co-leadership is a long-term initiative—longer than a single transitional year. The organization hopes to build and grow in the right ways: to build, through trial and testing, evolving leadership structures with the right combination of collaborators, and to cultivate the right resources to realize this transition under conducive and compassionate conditions.

### **Questions to Consider**

- How does an organization effect change and inch closer to the leadership model that best serves its long-term objectives over time?
- How can they portion their budget to make this change of leadership model sustainable?
- Appendix A lists the eight leadership models that the consultants researched. What types of leadership models can be effective for an organization like CanAsian Dance?

### **References**

Jethalal, Seema and Lee, Sally. 2023. “Final report: A review of CanAsian Dance's impact and opportunities.” Toronto, ON: CanAsian Dance.  
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Reid, Wendy and Hilde Fjellvæ. 2023. *Co-leadership in the Arts and Culture: Sharing Values and Vision*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Co-Leadership-in-the-Arts-and-Culture-Sharing-Values-and-Vision/Reid-Fjellvaer/p/book/978103239649>

## **Appendix A: Leadership Models Considered**

### **Model 1: Dual leadership:**

Artistic Director (AD) handles artistic and programming responsibilities. General Manager (GM) or Executive Director (ED) manages revenue generation, operations, and board management.

### **Model 2: Administrative lead + Co-artistic leads:**

GM/ED supported by two or more Artistic Leads. Co-Artistic Leads may have rotational terms.

### **Model 3: Trio leadership:**

ED/Managing Director + AD + Artistic/Executive/Company Producer.

### **Model 4: Disbursed leadership/artist collective/co-op:**

Group of artists with a flat structure and horizontal governance. Decisions are made by consensus; non-artistic work divided among artistic leaders.

### **Model 5: Lead + artistic committee/curatorial collective:**

Festival Director, Producer, or Administrative Lead supported by a part-time artistic committee or curatorial collective.

### **Model 6: Dynamic governance (sociocracy):**

Peer governance system for non-hierarchical decision making and decentralized power.

### **Model 7: Matricultural Indigenous leadership:**

Heart-centered model prioritizing matriarchal leadership values. Decisions made by consensus in talking circles, openness to spirituality. (*Note: The consultants researched this model for informational purposes only, and there was no intention to recommend or adopt it for CanAsian Dance.*)

### **Model 8: Staff-in-residence:**

Core leaders supported by a team of staff-in-residence (e.g., Curator-in-Residence, Emerging Artist-in-Residence). Staff-in-residence on contract and given space and support to innovate and present fresh ideas.

## Appendix B: Summary of SWOT Analysis of CanAsian Dance

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The organization has established credibility over the years with those who are familiar with its offerings.</li> <li>• CanAsian Dance's specific cultural focus of their mandate.</li> <li>• Supporting artists at all different stages of their careers through an array of diverse programming.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The organization requires greater precision and clarity around its mandate, mission, and vision, and how this is communicated to members of the public and the dance community.</li> <li>• This lack of clarity has also resulted in a lack of audience loyalty, inconsistent attendance, and transactional relationships, hindering organizational operations and growth.</li> <li>• The organization has a limited operational budget, which impacts staff capacity, fundraising capabilities, and financial flexibility.</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restructuring its leadership model can enable CanAsian Dance to reach untapped communities interested in Asian culture outside of the dance sector, beyond its current geographic locations.</li> <li>• This period can redefine the organization's strategic priorities and succession plans, and how it invests in dancers and choreographers for the long term.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is still present within the dance sector, as seen in limited funding, scarce local presentation opportunities, and extensive venue closures.</li> <li>• Income precarity in the city: Toronto is becoming increasingly unaffordable for dancers, choreographers, and dance organizations.</li> </ul>