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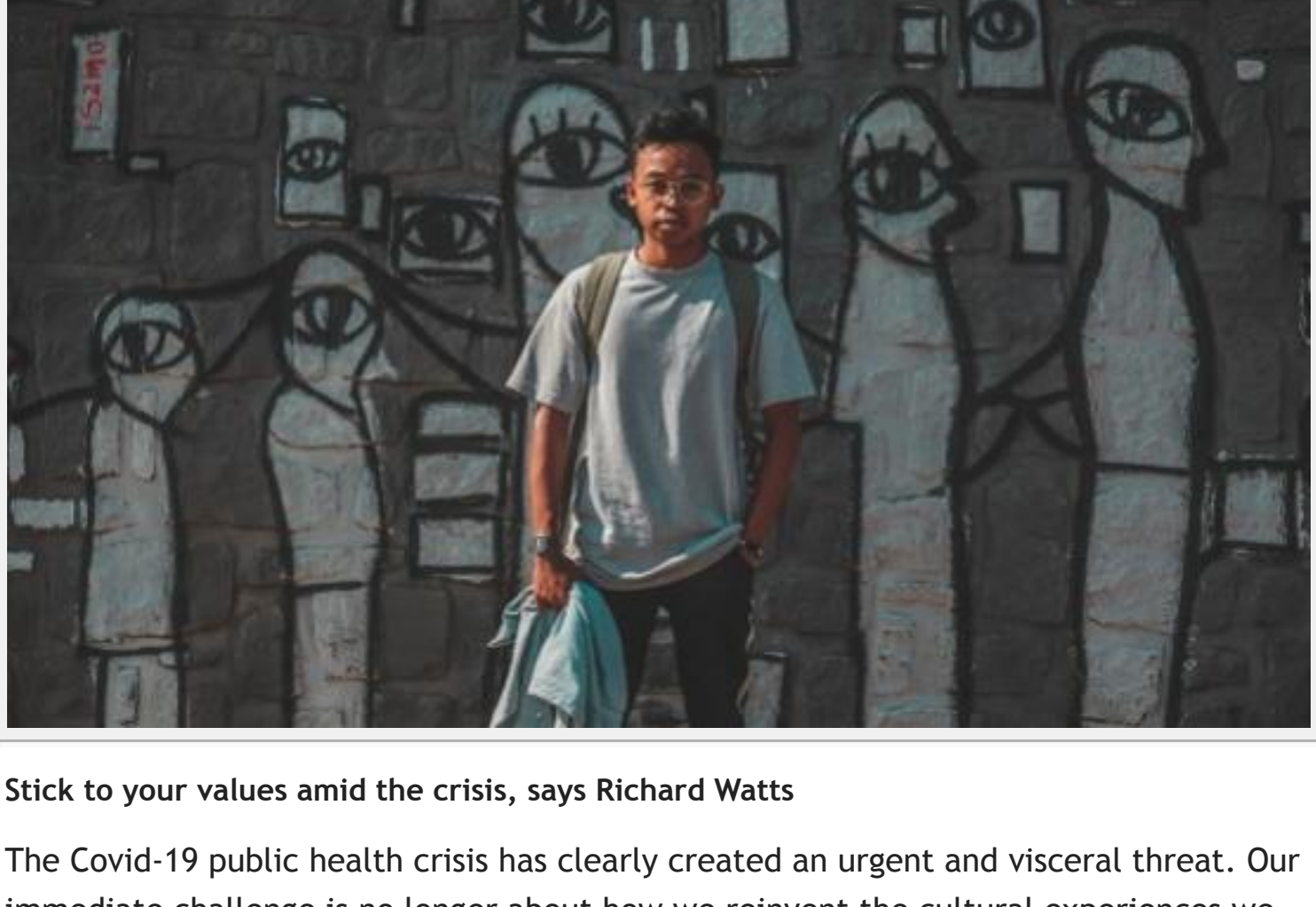
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How can we best respond to a crisis?

An ArtsProfessional feature in partnership with **people make it work**
we help organisations change and develop

The challenges facing arts organisations have changed dramatically – but that doesn't mean giving up on our core values, says **Richard Watts**.



Stick to your values amid the crisis, says Richard Watts

The Covid-19 public health crisis has clearly created an urgent and visceral threat. Our immediate challenge is no longer about how we reinvent the cultural experiences we deliver and become relevant to 21st century audiences. It's about how we survive for the next six months, stay connected with our communities and audiences and support our staff and colleagues through this challenging time.

Arts organisations are experiencing unprecedented pressure as public-facing organisations at the heart of communities, as vulnerable organisations often reliant on the public to remain viable, as employers and a source of income for countless freelance and casual workers, and with staff who are family members, friends and neighbours and are people concerned and affected in myriad ways by this public health crisis.

Our [Change Creation](#) team, as well as our 50-strong team of cultural sector consultants at [people.make.it.work](#), is dedicated to helping cultural sector organisations and leaders. We feel that between us we have lived through and witnessed most of the challenges that arts organisations can experience. We bring that lived experience to the work we do across the sector. But I don't think any of us has experienced a situation quite like this one before. We are all being tested in new ways and across multiple dimensions. How do we respond to the social, financial, personal and economic pressures we are experiencing today, and that might unfold tomorrow?

Authentic responses

We know that organisational and social change is often hampered by complacency and everyday pressures. We may lack either a galvanising vision or a practical concrete plan to engage with. Our response to the heating of our planet is a case in point. We know that short-term organisational and social change is most effectively achieved when there is an urgent and visceral threat: our reactions to floods or missing children show us how these events can punch through our 'business as usual' response.

While long-term issues have to battle with complacency to get our attention, immediate issues challenge our composure. It can be difficult to make good decisions when we are under so much pressure to make quick ones. We don't have the luxury to be slow at times like this, but we also need to consult our wisdom and experience, to involve multiple perspectives and to build consensus.

We've been discussing how best to respond to this situation with our partners from the Coventry City of Culture Leadership Programme, Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries, and within our own [Change Creation](#) Programme and [people.make.it.work](#) consultancy team. We've been thinking about how to develop responses that are authentic, that buy time, support people and organisations, create options and generate new approaches.

So how can we act quickly and enable action while also being nuanced and drawing on wisdom? Here are some insights we've identified that we believe can offer some guidance:

Combine clarity with iteration

At moments of extreme uncertainty, people crave clarity. As leaders we need to offer definite steps and clear guidance. But when circumstances are changing so fast, and when we might not have had time to explore the question from every viewpoint, let's aim for 'fast and flex' not 'fast and fix'. Let's issue clear guidance, but with an indication that it will be updated on a regular basis, that we are continuing dialogues with a range of people and we expect it to evolve. And let's tell people how they'll hear the next iteration and how they can make their own voice heard.

Build a 'process vision'

We all want a clear vision of the future. As leaders we can sometimes give that, but more often we will enable it to emerge. Let's share a 'process vision' rather than 'destination visions' with our teams. A process vision gives a clear journey about how we will shape our plans and future together, what the steps and options might be and how we will reach decisions. It tells people how we will arrive at a destination vision, but doesn't define it now. Process visions are great in times of uncertainty, since they give clarity of process without fixing our final destination.

Organisational culture and values

In difficult times, strong organisational cultures can give us a route map through complexity. When we stand in our values, our next steps often become clear. During a crisis it is often tempting to ditch shared values and issue an edict. But values are only truly useful when they are under pressure. Let's make sure our culture shapes our times, rather than letting our times shape our culture.

Collective insight

When we are under pressure a diversity of perspectives also remains crucial, so let's make time to hear the wisdom, experience and intuition that exists across our organisations. We'll make better decisions with multiple viewpoints, and the decisions will be owned and implemented with greater clarity if the fingerprints of the whole team can be felt on our response.

Connect with our audiences and communities

Many of our organisations have missions that involve creating transformational experiences for individuals and communities. If we consider that mission, what responses, interventions or actions suggest themselves? Of course our audiences are not only footfall, bums on seats or income sources. We know that they are stressed, have needs and that their cultural organisation might be a positive force for them. Let's stand by our missions and be inspired by our higher intentions as well as the imperative to survive.

Empathise with human responses

We know that as humans we [respond to change](#) in predictable and understandable ways. The [Kubler-Ross curve](#) eloquently captures the ways we feel as negative change unfolds in front of us - with immobilisation, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and testing preceding acceptance. We also know that organisations and individuals experience a drop in productivity and clarity as we transition from one reality to another. Let's remember that each of us has an inevitable set of human responses to change and uncertainty, and that these responses call for a patient and empathetic response.

Create opportunities for control

Most of us struggle when we feel control has been taken from us. Fast-moving global, national, local, and personal situations inevitably shift our sense of certainty and erode our sense of control. Let's look for opportunities for everyone in our organisations and communities to exercise control - offer options, encourage the development of individual or team plans, explore alternatives and give choices wherever we can. While the circumstances might be beyond our control, our personal responses don't need to be.

Expert panel

Our Change Creation cohort of 60 leaders from 40 cultural organisations recently met online for two days to explore how we can respond to the current situation. We've been working to pool our wisdom in four key areas - supporting our people, contingency planning and implementation, cashflow and business planning and long-term refinements to business models. Our time together ended with an equally useful external perspective from some of our colleagues and associates at [people.make.it.work](#) and [Achatas Philanthropy](#), who we brought together for a virtual expert panel.

- [Kate Fielding](#), (former Head of Communications at the Natural History Museum): internal and external communications
- [Caroline McCormick](#), Director at Achatas Philanthropy: engaging with funders and patrons
- [Anna Dinnen](#), independent consultant: business models and stabilisation
- [David Micklem](#), Co-Founder and Chair of 64 million artists, writer and arts consultant: supporting our creative communities
- [Karen Turner](#), Executive Director at National Youth Theatre: business models and cashflow

[Watch a video of the discussion.](#)

I'd like to finish by reflecting on hope, love and community. In our role delivering the Coventry City of Culture Leadership Programme, we spent much of last week meeting 96 applicants to that programme. The most extraordinary people from every background, age group and context brought their leadership, their civic passion and their ideas for social change through arts and culture. Fifteen of them will be selected to create a truly diverse cross section of the city in a leadership cohort. Having met those 96 people, my money is on Coventry. My money is on community, my money is on the humanity we saw in the faces, heard in the words and felt in that space. Our communities are in safe hands. We need to find ways to enable and support those plans and intentions, but we aren't short of powerful, incredible people to shape an inclusive and supportive future.

Richard Watts is Director of people make it work.

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This article, sponsored and contributed by people make it work, is part of a [series](#) sharing insights and learning to help organisations facing change challenges to grow and develop.

Link to Author(s): [Richard Watts](#)

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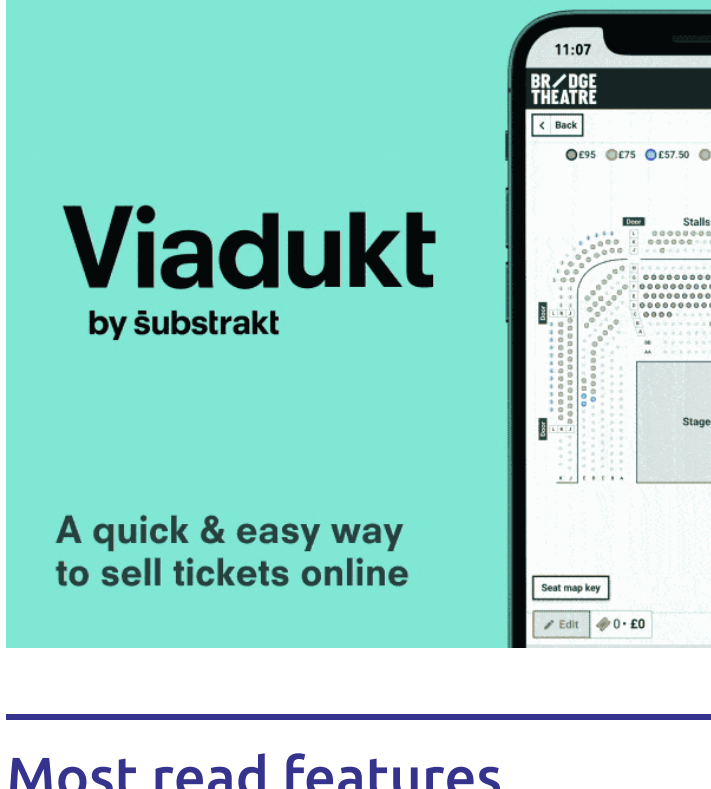
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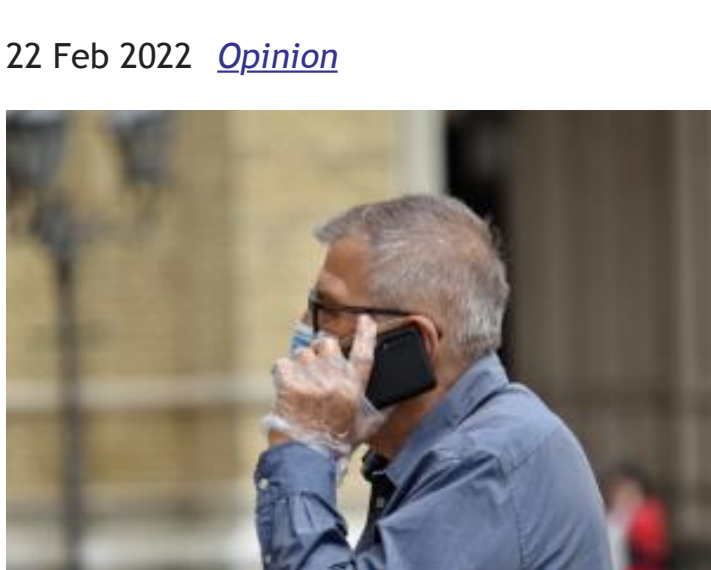
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Director

South West

Salary: 37,000 - 37,000 (pro rata)

BRISTOL OLD VIC

Artistic Director

South West

Salary: £80,000 - £85,000 (per annum)

OPEN EYE GALLERY

Tree Story - Freelance positions

North West

Senior Leader (Operations)

South East

Salary: £42,000 - £42,000 (per annum)

Executive Producer

North West

Salary: £32,000 - £32,000 (per annum)

Artistic Director

East Midlands

Salary: £42,000 - £45,000 (per annum)

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North West

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North West

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South West

Programme Manager

North West

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East

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North West

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Programme Director

East

Salary: £35,000 - £40,000 (per annum)

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