MAKE IT HAPPEN

Audience Development & Community Building in small socio-cultural centres
Inspirations & Learnings for practice

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FULCRUM

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FULCRUM is an Erasmus+ project helping European socio-culture workers develop future-proof skills in the fields of environmental sustainability and community building. Discover more here.

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Contents

About this booklet... 4

Audience Development? Community Building? 6

Possible entry points ... 8

... to start the process of initiating audience change and building community relationships 8

Core Challenges & Key Learnings 11

It is organisational development 11

Defining clear goals 14

Avoiding the assumption trap 17

Making sense of your audience 21

No fear of data collection 23

Moving from theory to action 26

Prototyping in practice – inspirations from the FULCRUM training experience: 29

Final Reflections: Small Shifts, Real Change 32

About this booklet...

This publication builds on the content and experiences gathered in the **MAKE IT HAPPEN Training Programme**, conducted between 2024 – 2025. The programme was part of the Erasmus+ funded project '*FULCRUM: Skills for future-oriented socio-cultural centres*', aiming to strengthen the capacity of small, independent socio-cultural organisations in Europe to develop and engage audiences and communities in more sustainable, participatory ways. Twenty-four cultural workers from cultural organisations in eight European countries participated in the MAKE IT HAPPEN Training Programme – representing a wide diversity of socio-cultural centres: from municipal cultural centres to jazz clubs, and from small theatres to amateur visual arts initiatives and galleries.

This is not your typical 'cookbook', where you find a comprehensive step-by-step guide on how to strengthen audience development and community building – especially since a wealth of such resources already exists.

Instead, this publication concentrates on key takeaways, learnings, and practical solutions to recurring challenges that are particularly relevant for small socio-cultural centres when they start this journey. However, where appropriate, it refers to further resources to inspire and support you on this journey.

It reflects the personal experiences, perceptions and the participants' insights. It is not trying to offer one-size-fits-all solutions, but instead to identify common approaches that are particularly feasible for small, precariously operating socio-cultural centres.

Considering that much of the literature and good practices refer to comparably large, well-equipped cultural institutions, it wants to help set realistic expectations, aiming to inspire and encourage, building on the concrete experience gained during the training programme.

In this regard – thanks are due to all participants, who shared their insights and personal experiences, as well as to the trainers of the programme, **Jonathan Goodacre (The Audience Agency, UK)** and **Niels Righolt (CKI, Denmark)**, who guided the participants thoughtfully through the whole training journey.

More about **FULCRUM and the MAKE IT HAPPEN Training Programme** here.

LINK TIP:

The 'Adeste Plus' project developed the ACED programme, which provides a blueprint for 'Audience Centred Experience Design'. It offers extensive background information and detailed resources for each step

LINK TIP:

The Audience Agency offers numerous guides and tools for implementing audience development – from a step-by-step plan to tools for audience segmentation

Audience Development? Community Building?

Before presenting key learnings, it is helpful to clarify what is meant by audience development and community building – two terms that are often used, but not always clearly defined.

Audience development has long been associated with cultural organisations' efforts to attract and expand audiences, often linked to marketing, visibility, and ticket sales. Over time, however, the concept has evolved and continues to do so. Today, it clearly goes beyond numbers and outreach to include engagement, participation and long-term relationship building. At its core, it attempts to get a deeper, meaningful understanding of the people and the audience who engage with (or do not engage with) a cultural space, and the relationship a cultural organisation wants to build with them.

This shift brings audience development closer to community building – focusing on how people engage with each other. It places the common characteristics, needs, references, and voices at the centre, often emphasising co-creation, shared decision-making, and mutual ownership within cultural spaces.

Rather than opposing ideas, audience development and community building are best understood as two sides of the same coin.

Put simply, audience development asks: Who are the people a cultural space is in touch with? What is really known about them? While community building is about deepening the relationship with people using a cultural space, adjusting and tailoring the cultural work to meet the needs of communities.

So, you can't talk about audience development without, at some point, really trying to understand the communities you're talking about. In turn, you can't talk about communities without using audience development tools to narrow down who these people are, what their characteristics are, and what we know about them.

Possible entry points ...

... to start the process of initiating audience change and building community relationships

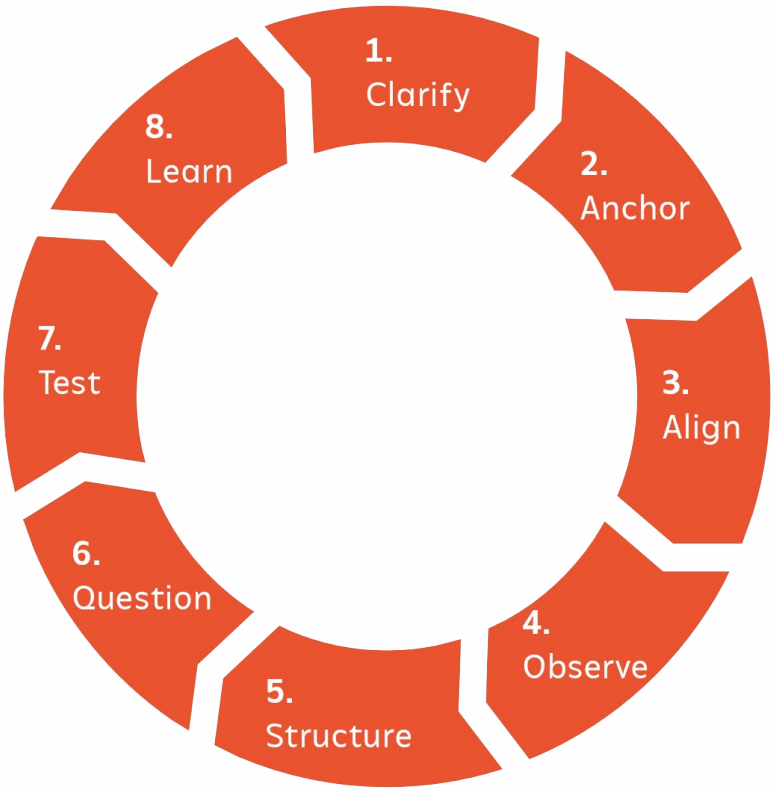
1. Defining a clear goal

What kind of change are you exactly seeking?

What kind of relationship are you hoping for, with whom and why?

2. Anchoring the goal in the organisation

How is this rooted in the organisation's vision and mission?



How does it relate to the existing values and practices of the cultural organisation?

3. Securing internal support

Is everybody in the organisation on board – from leadership to volunteers?
Is there readiness to support potential changes resulting from this process?

4. Mapping existing knowledge

What do you really know about your audiences or communities – their motivations, expectations, experiences, needs, behaviours and attitudes?

What information and data already exist within the organisation that could be collected and organised more intentionally and systematically?

5. Making sense of the data

How can the available information be structured in a meaningful way?
Are there recurring patterns that could be grouped into working segments or provisional personas?

6. Identifying knowledge gaps

Which observations are based on evidence, and which are assumptions?

What additional information is needed to test these assumptions in a simple, manageable way?

7. Developing a first prototype

How can the defined goals be translated into a very small-scale, low-risk and low-resource first step of a possible action or change?

What is the simplest version that can be tested in everyday practice with real people, and what should be learned from it?

8. Reflecting and learning

What happened when the prototype was tested? What did you actually learn from it?

What do you want to keep, adapt, or scale up from this test – or should you simply drop it and try something new?

Core Challenges & Key Learnings

It is organisational development

Audience Development and Community Building constitute organisational development. This often clashes with the working realities of small socio-cultural organisations. They are characterised by limited staff, budget, resources and little capacity for long-term planning, resulting in short-term, output-driven project work that is largely shaped by external factors.

In short, they have too much on their plate on a daily basis. So, shifting from daily operational tasks to more strategic work, such as developing and testing new approaches in practice, is challenging. They only have a limited amount of time. Therefore, it can be overwhelming, even though the willingness to truly change is there.

This may come as bad news, but it is important to set realistic expectations: it cannot be done as an add-on or side project assigned to individual staff members. This means that if an organisation - like many – is already operating at the limits of its resources, it requires serious decision-making: Are we ready to fully commit to integrating this into our daily operations? Are we ready and willing to embrace the change that this would bring to what we do, how we do it and who we do it for?

Even though many different definitions of community building and audience development exist, in particular, there are a few core principles that consistently emerge:

Principle	What it means in practice
Planned	It is not random or reactive – it's **intentional and rooted in the cultural** organisation, its mission and values.
Organisation-wide	It's not a side-project – it involves **every part of the organisation and everyone within it**, from management, to staff, and volunteers;
Relational	It's about **building relationships** – not just delivering content events or messaging.
Audience-/ community-centred	It starts with **understanding people** – their concrete lives, contexts, needs and aspirations, not assumptions about them.
Iterative	It's **an ongoing process** – not a finished plan. It evolves through learning, testing ideas, gathering feedback, and adapting.
Balanced	It needs to be backed by creative goals, social relevance and financial sustainability, which, in turn, it supports.

LINK TIP:

Study on Audience Development: How to place audiences at the centre of cultural organisations. Final Report. Study Commissioned by the European Commision, 2017

Unless the whole organisation is committed to making a change, there's only so much you can do. And change has to come from within which often means talking about and questioning values again; but also questioning existing privileges and ways you used to do your work – which can be scary. In practice, you have to be prepared for 'internal resistance'. Often, resistance is not clearly articulated. It can be passive- for example, not actively opposing an idea and even saying it sounds interesting, but not doing what is necessary to make the change. This process of securing full organisational commitment not only needs to be acknowledged, but also actively addressed: the real work begins within the organisation before any concrete action is taken.

Inspiration from practice:

- Organising an internal kick-off session, involving all co-workers, including the cleaning staff and volunteers, to openly discuss how you want to develop further as an organisation.

- Setting aside dedicated time on a regular basis, for example in monthly cross-disciplinary team meetings.

- Assuring that dedicated resources are available – not only in one department, but for the whole organisation in terms of time, staff, and money to enable them to actively get involved in the process. This was translated into reassessing funding applications.

- Trying to turn limited resources into a strength: Involving their community, right from the start, as small organisations with limited resources need people who help carry them – which means people from 'outside' the organisation – a step that can be challenging, but one that requires sharing power right from the start of the process.

Defining clear goals

Reaching clarity about what you actually want to change and what kind of change you want to achieve can be challenging. This is quite common in the cultural sector, which is highly value-driven and full of strong ideas and aspirations. Translating an organisational purpose into specific audience objectives is often the "hardest part" of the process as it also means focusing on the direction you want to go in.

In practice, most organisations begin by focusing on one of the following directions:

Dimension	Goal
Increase	Reaching more people than before, based on the people you are already reaching.
Deepen	Strengthening relationships with those already attending e.g. aiming to increase trust, loyalty, emotional investment, sense of belonging.
Extend	Engaging people beyond attending events, from passive participation into active involvement or co-ownership, e.g.as volunteers or collaborators.
Diversity	Reaching different people than before.

In doing so, small socio-cultural centres in particular experience a tension between the need for financial sustainability (attracting more paying guests) and the social/democratic mission (reaching more diverse, underrepresented groups). It's "dancing with dilemmas," trying to balance the necessary logic of efficiency with the non-measurable, aesthetic, and community-building qualities of art.

LINK TIP:

The Ansoff matrix to identify your goals

LINK TIP:

The "How Might We" Formula to focus your goals

Many socio-cultural organisations have a very clear inner compass, a ‘gut feeling’ about where they want to go. To move beyond the ‘gut feeling’ in practice or rather translate this into first, initial goals, it can be helpful to change how you approach these challenges. Instead of identifying goals or thinking in terms of answers, it can be helpful to aim for better questions.

Inspiration from practice:

Create a concrete one-page design brief that defines a specific problem, the target group, and measurable objectives. A central tool for this translation can be the "How Might We?“ formula, which reframes broad ambitions into creative challenges. This approach helped to navigate complex questions by assuming solutions exist and encouraging collective brainstorming sessions. Examples included:

"How might we provide a welcoming atmosphere for families with small kids visiting our venue so that they feel less stressed and enjoy their visit?“

"How might we provide a safer space for the teenagers aged 14 to 16 to experiment around with music and political ideas?“

"How might we interest teachers in our new autumn school drama programme for children aged 8 to 10 so that we show them the sort of activity that will involve their students?“

A further key learning

is that there is no such thing as ‘the audience’. Broad categories like ‘young people’ or ‘refugees’ are misleading because they lack shared characteristics. Instead, it is important to define very specific target groups based on behaviour, attitude, and needs. This means not investing energy in gathering data or defining potentially misleading demographic categories, such as age or gender. Put differently: What do you really know if you know somebody is female and 35 years old? And in particular – what do you know that is useful

or relevant to you as a cultural organisation?

Inspirations from practice:

- An organisation shifted from a general "youth" focus to "young families with one or two kids who have moved into the area in the last five years," specifically targeting a known population of 1,000 people who used the area only as a "sleeping district".

- Another organisation structured their existing audience according to their behaviour profiles – analysing the behaviour of their newsletter subscribers.

- Another approach centred on conflicting interests in using a library. Specific user types were identified such as "The Campers" (parents with toddlers arriving at 9:30am) versus "Seniors/Men 65 plus" (who visit for silence and newspapers).

Defining what relationship you aim for and with whom – and how this is related to your organisation's mission – is of course based on what you actually know about the people you already reach and what assumptions you have that you need to test with real people.

Avoiding the assumption trap

This point is something very delicate, as hardly any organisation would acknowledge that it might know very little about the audience and communities it reaches, beyond demographic indicators and consumption patterns. Again, there is this 'gut feeling' – or, more provocatively put, the assumption trap. This occurs when a cultural organisation relies on guesses, stereotypical ideas, or the aforementioned 'gut feeling' about who its audience is and what they need, rather than building an **evidence-based understanding**. Most of the time, there is the uncontested assumption that communities are similar to us, that we know about their needs and expectations by simply looking at our own needs and expectations.

Remember: Audiences do not see what we see. They have all kinds of things going on in their lives. The definition of our cultural organisation is not alone in our hands; it is in the hands of many, many different groups.

If we strive to have meaningful conversations about what we do, for whom we do it and why we do it, addressing this delicate aspect is key. This is particularly important if we want to foster a more democratic and reflective cultural space that does not only address its own community or a set of people with similar attitudes and expectations towards arts and culture. Hence, directly addressing this is strongly connected to cultural democracy.

However, this is not only important from a societal and political perspective. It is also essential because designing for a vague 'average' person often results in experiences that satisfy no one in particular. Or put differently: Designing for the average means designing for no one! You cannot 'catch 'em-all' – as it is real people, with real needs, lives, and expectations that you're trying to build a meaningful relationship with.

Two useful exercises:

Mapping the Audience Journey

The idea is simple: what does someone experience from the moment they consider coming to an event – all the way through to when they leave and reflect on it afterwards?

It is a simple tool to help uncover assumptions and generate better questions.

Chose a type of visitor – and remember to be very specific in terms of who you want to focus on.

Explore things through their eyes; try to put yourself in their shoes:

Phase	Possible questions to ask
Before	How do they find out about your organisation or an event? What motivates them or makes them hesitate? What questions do they have?
Arrival	How do they get there – physically and emotionally? Do they have any special needs? What else will they do when they visit (e.g. arrange childcare, run errands, meet friends)? Is the entrance clear? How easy is it to navigate the space? Do they feel welcome or uncomfortable?
During	What are they expecting? What do they like or dislike during an experience? Who else is there – and how does that shape their experience? Do they feel informed, lost, or comfortable?
After	What will their lasting impression be? What do they take away from the experience? Do they talk about it with others? Do they know how to stay connected or return? Is there a follow-up opportunity?
Tip: In practice the 'after' phase is often overlooked – yet it matters most for creating connection, loyalty, or feedback.	

The Empathy Map

A useful exercise to challenge the assumptions and stereotypes is

the Empathy Map. It means taking a step back and asking: What would it feel like to experience your organisation, your event, or space for the first time?

Again, this exercise requires you to:

Chose a type of visitor – and remember to be very specific about who you want to focus on.

Explore things through their eyes; try to put yourself in their shoes:

Dimensions	Possible questions to ask
Cognitive & Emotional	What might this person be thinking or feeling – about themselves, the space, the event, or the people around them? What worries or motivates them? What expectations or doubts might they have?
Visual	What do they see when they arrive? Who is there? How is the space set up? What messages or signs are visible? What does the visual environment tell them about who this space is for?
Verbal and Behavioural	What might they say – to others, to staff, or to themselves? How do they behave in the space? Do they ask questions, stay silent, observe, participate?
Auditory	What do they hear – in terms of tone, language, and sounds? What are others saying around them? What kind of atmosphere or energy do they experience?
If it seems difficult, it is of course helpful to actively invite people to give you feedback. It can also be helpful to do the 'Newcomers Experience' – remembering or imagining coming to a venue with codes you're not familiar with.	

LINK TIP:

Information sheets on the 'Audience Journey' and 'Newcomer Empathy' exercises

KEY LEARNINGS from practice

True audience development is based on **authentic and empathetic understanding** rather than intellectual guesses or assumptions. This requires shifting from collecting data *about* people to gaining genuine insight *into* people through listening and observation.

Inspiration from practice

- Organisations reached out to representatives of groups who were not currently attending to identify **real barriers**—such as language issues, physical accessibility, or a lack of awareness that had been missed in internal staff brainstorming.

- Participants identified "sensors" in their teams – such as people working at the entrance, bar, or the cloakroom, but also the cleaning team to collect **"soft data"** by intentionally watching where visitors hesitated in their spaces, what signs they actually read, and what they said to or asked the staff.

- Organisations tested their assumptions by **interviewing individuals** (typically six to eight people) from the target background to confirm if the assumed experiences were accurate.

- Some organisations tested the validity of their empathy maps by forming **committees of people with specific needs** (e.g., people with disabilities) to provide ongoing, direct feedback on their institutional perceptions.

By combining the empathy map with an audience journey map, teams walked through the physical and emotional journey of a visitor to identify friction points and opportunities that matched the 'Pain – Gain' quadrant of the map – what could make an experience hard or uncomfortable? What could make it joyful, empowering or satisfying?

Again, what is important is that this is not about 'getting it right'. It's about deepening the view and understanding of real people, not imagined averages.

Making sense of your audience

It is obvious that a cultural organisation cannot tailor its communication to, or meet the needs of, every single person. So, there needs to be some practical grouping.

Segmentation and persona building are essential tools for cultural organisations because they allow them to move beyond a vague, generalised understanding of 'the audience' towards a human-centred and evidence-based approach, which is still manageable. It helps to:

- Avoid the aforementioned 'average problem' which allows organisations to recognise these differences and manage them effectively. ,
- Prioritise resources by focusing on groups that are relevant to their specific goals.
- Identify gaps in their current reach and define specific objectives for diversifying their audience.
- Identifying barriers to participation.

Segmentation is basically the grouping of people according to similar behaviours, attitudes, needs, or artistic preferences. In contrast, persona building is the process of creating fictional but realistic characters that represent specific types of audience members or community segments an organisation seeks to design for. These characters serve as 'flesh-and-blood' representations or avatars, allowing staff to step out of their own perspectives and look at the organisation through the audience's lens.

While **segmentation** is used to identify broad, useful patterns across a population, **persona building** focuses on bringing these groups to life to ensure cultural work remains human-centred and relevant to the community.

- One organisation developed a specific segmentation strategy to customise the organisation's newsletters and improve event cross-promotion. Moving away from age-based categories, four primary segments based on behaviour and interest were identified :
    - The Classics: People who enjoy traditional codes of theatre, costumes, and classical repertoire.
    - The Daring Ones: People open to novelty, surprise content, and active participation.
    - The Light-hearted: People with low attendance who typically visit once a year for a comedy or an 'easy' event.
    - History & World: Audiences specifically drawn to social issues and historical themes.

- Other participants tested self-segmentation techniques. One organisation experimented with "fun, astrological-style questions" (e.g., "Today I feel more like...") to let the audience playfully assign themselves to underlying segments without feeling like they were being categorized by staff.

- Another organisation developed concrete Persona such as 'Selin –The Curious First-Timer': This persona represented a student new to the city who works evenings and seeks social connection but feels intimidated by formal cultural venues. This profile helped the team identify specific "barriers" such as unclear language, or the need for personal invitations.

LINK TIP:

Step-by-step guide on audience segmentation

LINK TIP:

Information sheets on the 'Persona Building' exercise

No fear of data collection

Working with real evidence-based audience data is critical because it shifts a cultural organisation from a perspective based on internal assumptions to one centred on the actual lived experiences of its community. Ultimately, all concepts of audience segments, personas, needs, behaviours, and attitudes must be tested against real-life experiences and therefore verified or falsified through engagement with real people.

While the need to test working assumptions is often clear, moving to concrete data collection seems overwhelming, given scarce resources. When starting this process, it is important to know that this is not about 'big data' or expensive consultation, but rather about thoughtful data design and structured curiosity.

The bad news is that there is no alternative to gathering data to test assumptions and gain real insight. The good news is that, more often than not, organisations already have access to far more data than they realise. Even when it comes to hard data, there is no need to gather large datasets all at once. Since the whole journey is a learning process, it can instead be built gradually over time.

KEY LEARNINGS from practice

Data collection does not require "big data" or expensive consultants, but rather structured curiosity. Doable approaches include:

- **Building statistical relevance gradually**: A simple profile log of 12–15 questions taking only 2–4 minutes to answer can build a massive database over time. Collecting just six responses a day results in 1,800 records a year, providing a more robust dataset than many large-scale national surveys.

- **Utilizing "Soft Data":** Organisations already possess valuable informal insights from front-of-house staff, such as cleaners, technicians, and bartenders, who act as "sensors" for how people actually use the space.

- **Low-Threshold Methods**: Creativity in data collection can reduce barriers for both staff and audiences.

- **Comparing and Benchmarking**: Comparisons—between years, events, or different organisations—are where data analysis becomes most insightful, allowing teams to see real shifts in behaviour.

Inspiration from practice

Existing data sources participants identified or tested as new approaches included:

- **Ticketing Systems and Lists:** Participants noted that even simple lists provide data on who attends, how often, and the size of the group bookings – and sometimes, even statistical data on customer locations, such as visitors travelling from one city to another.

- **Digital Tools:** Newsletter subscriber lists and social media insights were used to track which links people click or which themes spark interaction.

- **Drink Coaster Questions:** tested printing three fun, personal questions on the back of drink coasters at the bar. This turned feedback into a relaxed activity that sparked conversations while people were waiting for shows.

- **Bar-Area Short Interviews:** To capture feedback from people in a hurry, short interviews at the bar between the doors opening and the concert start were conducted.

- **Segmentation Quizzes:** One organisation tested "astrological-style" fun questions (e.g., "Today I feel more like…") to let the audience playfully assign themselves to underlying segments.

- **Pre-announced Feedback:** One organisation tested informing the audience at the start of a show that they wanted to improve and specifically asked visitors to stay for four minutes of feedback afterwards.

- **Post-it Feedback Boards:** Simple boards where visitors could anonymously leave short answers to a single question, such as "What would make this more welcoming?", were used to identify common themes.

Moving from theory to action

Moving from a clear, concrete goal to action in practice is the most important step. At the same time, it is important to remember that neither audience development nor community building is about having everything figured out. Rather, it is about asking better questions, striving to learn something new – even through failure – and actually putting ideas into practice. Ultimately, change can be challenging.

One way to tackle this is '**Prototyping**'. It is a powerful and practical methodology for turning abstract ideas into concrete action by creating a **Minimum Viable Experience (MVE)**. Instead of launching a full-scale, permanent project, an organisation produces a preliminary, low-risk version of an idea to test its essential components with real people. The central idea of the MVE is to select the key ingredients of a proposal that can be tried out practically without the need for a massive budget or extensive resources.

This means actually asking: What is the simplest version that can be tested in everyday practice with real people – and what should be learned from it? It is important to remember that this is about testing, collecting feedback, reviewing and adapting. It is not about success – on the contrary. It should encourage a mindset where 'failure' is not a setback but a necessary step in learning and refining an idea – and if it doesn't work out, put the prototype to rest. However, it should also be tangible: moving ideas out of meeting rooms and into real spaces with real people to see how they actually behave and respond.

To develop an effective prototype, organisations typically follow a structured step-by-step approach:	
The Prototype Statement:	A clarifying formula used to define the experiment: **"In order to... [understand/try out/change] + for... [target group] + we are going to... [describe method]"**
Target Group Focus	Identifying a specific persona or segment to involve in the test, rather than a vague 'general public'.
Lo-fi Models	Early versions can be as simple as a **paper sketch, a mock-up, or a 'scratch' event** to test functionality before more involved versions are built.
Data and Feedback Design	A plan for gathering first-hand insights is critical because **feedback is everything** – also for testing a prototype. This might include short on-site interviews, profile logs (10–15 simple questions on an iPad), or anonymous feedback notes.
Evaluation Tools:	Methods like the **'Love it Leave it'** tool or the **'Wow-How-Now Decision Matrix'** help teams decide which prototypes and ideas are impactful and feasible enough to scale up

LINK TIP:

The Wow-How-Now Decision Matrix

Particularly for small socio-cultural organisations, which lack big budgets and capacity for long-term planning, developing an effective prototype can be a very helpful and vital approach for several structural and strategic reasons:

- **Minimizing Risk:** It allows institutions to innovate while **reducing the overall financial and reputational risk** associated with large-scale failures.

- **Speeding Up Implementation:** By 'slowing down' to prototype, organisations actually speed up in the long run by avoiding the mistake of sticking with a weak or overly complex idea for too long.

- **Overcoming Internal Resistance:** Framing a change as a 'temporary test' helps reduce staff anxiety regarding a loss of privileges or an increase in workload, making it easier to get the whole team on board.

- **Evidence-Based Insights:** It provides **real insights into how people engage** with the organisation in theory versus in practice, revealing hidden barriers like confusing signage or physical obstacles.

- **Building Ownership:** Involving community members or 'proxy' groups (like teachers or parents) in the prototyping stage fosters a sense of collective ownership and shared responsibility for the cultural space.

Prototyping in practice – inspirations from the FULCRUM training experience:

The FULCRUM training was intended as a push to action, a facilitator of first steps, which culminated in hands-on prototyping. To inspire, here are some of the examples participants tested in their socio-cultural organisations – demonstrating the manifold ways audience development and community building can unfold in practice:

Spatial and Architectural Prototypes

Many organisations used prototypes to address physical or perceived barriers in their venues:

- **Signage and Navigation** To address confusion regarding three different sets of stairs that all led to the same venue, the team prototyped humorous or clear signage to help visitors navigate the "temple-like" architecture and feel more at home from their first step.

- **Lobby Rearrangement**: One organisation rearranged its lobby to transform it into a welcoming space for gathering and eating rather than just a passage, explicitly moving away from a "temple of culture" image.

- **Under Construction Event**: Facing a venue closure for renovation, the team prototyped a farewell event in front of the building, where people shared memories on postcards and co-designed how to stay connected during the transition.

Engagement and Programming Prototypes

These prototypes tested new ways of reaching specific personas or

underserved groups:

- **"Inspiration Day" for Youth**: To understand why teenagers did not attend a long-standing Maritime Festival, the organiser invited 100 high-school students for a brainstorming session and a one-minute pitch exercise to identify what would make the event relevant to them.

- **Newcomer Breakfast**: To lower barriers for local residents, a cultural venue prototyped an informal breakfast with no agenda, making space for participation rather than just artistic consumption.

- **Kids' Theatre Experience**: To reduce "stressed" feelings in families, the team prototyped changing performance times to vacation mornings and inviting people earlier to the foyer for painting activities using the backs of old posters.

Feedback and Data Collection Prototypes

Participants tested low-threshold methods to build a stronger evidence base:

- **Drink Coaster Questions**: Instead of standard surveys, the team printed three personal questions on the back of drink coasters (e.g., "What song can you not get out of your head?") at the bar to introduce the team and learn about the audience's interests in a fun, relaxed way.

- **Bar Area Interviews**: One organisation prototyped short on-site interviews conducted between the doors opening and the concert starting, catching visitors while they were already waiting at the bar.

- **Noise-Cancelling Headphones**: As part of an accessibility focus,

the team tested providing noise-cancelling headphones and colourful cushions to make performances more comfortable for visitors with sensory sensitivities or other specific access needs.

Internal and Organisational Prototypes

Prototyping was also used to address internal resistance and power dynamics:

- **Communication Mandate**: To overcome internal "screaming into a void," the team prototyped changing who communicated projects internally. They found that a newer, less "founder-entrenched" colleague received significantly more feedback than the person who had been onboarding volunteers for nine years.

- **The "Safe Space for Unsafe Ideas"**: A focus group with 15 organisations was used as a prototype to discuss "crazy" ideas for a monument's accessibility, leading participants to imagine radical solutions like a 300-floor glass skyscraper to rethink perceived barriers.

- **"Daring" Newsletters**: One organisation prototyped segmenting its newsletter into categories like "The Classics" or "The Daring Ones" to test if tailored recommendations would increase engagement without using traditional demographic labels.

Final Reflections: Small Shifts, Real Change

Audience development and community building do not begin with large strategies or structural reforms. They begin with a shift in perspective.

Six months after the training, participants described the most important change not as a new tool, but as a different way of thinking: listening more carefully, asking better questions, allowing ideas time to grow, and accepting that even modest changes can have a meaningful impact.

> **"The most important lesson is not to stop, even if the goals are not fully achieved."**

For small socio-cultural centres, this matters. This is because in contexts of limited staff, fragile budgets and strong value-driven missions, transformation rarely happens through radical restructuring. It happens through careful experimentation, prototyping, and conversations at the entrance desk, in the foyer, and at the bar.

Participants spoke about redesigning newsletters, rearranging lobbies, organising youth brainstorming sessions, introducing accessibility tools, creating informal breakfasts, forming new music clubs, and starting to systematically collect feedback. None of these actions alone is revolutionary. However, taken together, they represent a different organisational attitude.

> **"You can change the way of thinking and be out of traditional ways of doing."**

Audience development and community building are not separate projects. They are long-term change processes. They require time, translation and organisational anchsoring. And they require something else that emerged clearly from the evaluation: Kindness.

> **"Every other training I got did not speak so kindly about audiences. I loved that kindness."**

If there is one common denominator across all experiences, it is this mindset: Start small. Stay curious. Test. Listen. Adapt. Continue.

The MAKE IT HAPPEN Training Programme demonstrated that change is possible – not as a finished plan, but as an ongoing process; not as a destination, but as a commitment. That is how change becomes possible.

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