



No art? No social change. No innovation economy.

By **Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** | Metropolitan Group Creative Director/President

Welcome to the creative crisis. Welcome to a nation unable to solve its problems, incapable of civil discourse, bogged down in a morass of multicultural conflict, and lagging the global innovation marketplace. Just look forward a generation or two, and this will be America if we do not address the dearth of investment in art and imaginative capacity.

As social entrepreneurs, we have not stepped up as champions because we are not seeing the impacts that arts can have on every issue we care about. For too long we have allowed arts and culture to be treated as a nicety—the first budget cut and the last investment made. In the last 30 years, we have seen our nation's investment in the arts decline as advocates for the arts have scrambled to communicate relevancy through the frames of educational achievement, creative economy investment, and economic development—these are all true but undersell the power of art.

I have had the opportunity to work on poverty alleviation, educational equity, environmental health, and many other issues. Increasingly, I see that solutions to our most critical problems are not to be found in institutional hierarchy or traditional

policy and enforcement models, but rather in collective action, dispersed innovation, and shared responsibility. For example: About 35 years ago, we had a water pollution problem. We passed the Clean Water Act and enforced shutting down 100,000 pipes that dumped toxins into our rivers. Today, more river miles are polluted (not from industrial polluters, but from the actions of individual Americans that end up impacting their watersheds).

There is no way to monitor and enforce whether every American conserves water, makes alternative transportation choices, etc. However, when people and communities are armed with information, imagination, and the ability to engage with one another, we can change public will, our actions, and impacts. This is true for protecting our drinking water, preventing child abuse, dealing with climate change, and the list goes on.

Our economy is moving from being manufacturing-based to being innovation-based. Are we fostering the imaginative capacity to compete? We are faced with cataclysmic food,

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fuel and water issues if we do not address our reliance on a carbon economy. But are we sparking the creative thinking to find new technologies and new ways to work with nature? We have a dramatically changing population that is shifting the demographics of voters, students, workers, and leaders. Do we have the multicultural humility and the cultural context to leverage this change as an asset?

For the last century, financial and institutional capital have been the priority leverage points for addressing society's challenges. I deeply believe that, in the future, human, social, and creative capital will have the greatest impact. And this is where arts and culture are a necessity.

There is no discipline that nurtures and sparks the cognitive ability to imagine, and unleashes creativity and innovation, more than arts and culture. There is no approach that breaks barriers, connects across cultural differences, and engages our shared values more than arts and culture. There is no investment that connects us to each other, moves us to action, and strengthens our ability to make collective choices more than arts and culture.

To unlock this lever for change, I believe we must do several things:

- Focus on strategies that foster real collaboration—finding the best ways to leverage existing structures where they help and work around them where they get in the way, and to change them where they truly impede progress.
- Identify the stakeholders who must join, support, and advocate for solutions—we must reach beyond the “choir” to deeply understand the values, needs, and motivators of other partners including parents, community-based advocacy,

development organizations, business, neighborhood, and civic leaders.

- Get out of our own way by identifying solutions (programs, structures, policies, practices, and financial models) that might be outside our comfort zone and require letting go of territory.
- Learn from ourselves and others—a great deal of thinking and work has been done and has changed the positioning, importance, and funding in many other arenas.
- Recognize that it will be hard and will take a long-term commitment—this is not a simple or obvious task. The political challenges, economic constraints, competing interests, priority gaps, and complexities are all real and significant challenges.

And ultimately we must:

- Seize the moment—we are in a time of massive economic challenge, political, and generational change. Historically, the most significant reforms and investments in social capital and game-changing approaches have been accomplished during similar periods of challenge and transformation. We are in a time when policymakers will have to address significant structural changes and where the body politic is in play with pendulum swings left and right that demonstrate a willingness to risk the status quo.

We need the smarts and the power of the people reading this post to increase access to quality arts for every American. We don't need another cultural study or symposium. What we need is shared leadership that engages the political clout and the power of our voices to shift the normative expectations of our community and to demand art as a necessity, not a nicety.



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