

Growing As A Team In Unprecedented Times

The Team

Rattlestick Playwrights Theater¹ is an Obie-Award winning theater in New York that has developed and produced over 100 World Premieres since it was founded in 1994. Its mission is to produce ambitious plays to inspire empathy and provoke conversation that will lead to positive social change. Rattlestick is founded in the core values of Community, Equity and Empowerment. By upholding these values Rattlestick actively pursues Artistic Freedom.

Rattlestick is run by a multicultural, passionate Leadership Team comprised of the Artistic Director, Managing Director and the Development Manager. The team believes in and focuses on connecting with their stakeholders. The cosmopolitan Leadership Team was relatively new and navigated cultural differences and backgrounds, with none of the team members speaking the same mother tongue.

The Challenge

The leadership team was confronted with a physical closure due to Covid, the Black Lives Matter call for equity and the complexity of violence and uncertainty that surrounds immigrant artists, and unrest due to presidential elections. They worked hard to shift to a virtual stage and keep conversations going to inspire positive social change. The leadership team struggled with prioritizing team synergy and attention for each other's needs in this difficult time. For this reason, Rattlestick's Leadership Team engaged Fenneke Tjallingii-Brocken to help find ways for the team to radically grow and build resilience to be better able to meet its challenges.

The coaching goals:

- To create a deep tissue exploration of how the team can radically grow individually and collectively to subsequently impact their artists, audiences, and the greater community.
- Explore how to prioritize the humanity of one another, the artists, and its audiences in order to make Rattlestick a truly liberated space.

My approach

The coaching engagement took place over the period of a year (May 2020 - April 2021) and was designed to create space for systemic Awareness building, conscious Choice and Empowerment (Fenneke's ACE approach). The engagement included:

- Team development: Fenneke coached 10 team sessions to improve team effectiveness and support organizational strategy.
- Individual leadership development: In 1-on-1 coaching sessions Fenneke helped team members create calm, clarity and confidence to advance their individual leadership capacities.
- Team lead coaching: Fenneke helped the team leader gain clarity and inspiration, and created ongoing alignment for the coaching journey.

The kick-off meeting with the team established understanding of the coaching journey, clarified expectations, started building trust and set initial goals. To create awareness on gaps and development needs, Fenneke performed a team diagnostic and interviewed the team members and a variety of stakeholders. In the first two team sessions, assessment findings were explored, choices were made about

¹ This Case Study describes Fenneke's team coaching with Rattlestick as part of her Systemic Team Coaching Diploma Training. The team has endorsed public publication of this summary.

what to focus on and Fenneke and the team co-created the further coaching journey. The subsequent sessions were used to work on empowering the team to give effect to their choices and create habits that help them achieve their goals. In the last session, learnings were harvested, the team reinforced their commitment to newly adopted habits and forward momentum was ingrained.

"Fenneke has led our team through this process with grace, strength, flexibility, and sensitivity. She has taken the time and care to listen to who we are individually and as a team in order to best support us grappling with our different responsibilities, communication approaches, anxieties, and goals. She has met us where we are but also urged us forward in ways that have surprised me. She has shown us tools and methodologies to approach our work without it feeling like a lecture or a class." Daniella Topol, Artistic Director, Rattlestick

The Results

The coaching impacted the team in four areas:

1. Developing leadership
 - Increased connectedness and interdependency as senior leadership team improves organizational leadership and mission execution.
 - Greater clarity around the decision making process of the team allowing for a well thought-through process.
 - Better understanding of the importance of clarity of roles and responsibility.
2. Strengthening team connection
 - Recognition of the impact of the multicultural composition of, and systemic stress factors on the team, which allowed to humanize the workplace, increase work joy, and build trust and team resilience.
 - The deepened trust facilitates team members to express their needs, ask for help more openly and timely, and provide each other with support. Thereby increasing team effectiveness.
 - Greater team alignment on communication both internally within the organization and externally with stakeholders.
3. Readiness for future envisioning and strategic thinking
 - Formulation of a compelling team purpose to give the leadership team direction.
 - Increased insight into stakeholder needs allowing for a deepened connection with and service to staff, artists, donors and audience.
 - Set up of a meeting cadence for strategy sessions. This allows the team to feel less rushed, and bring in more creativity and innovation to futureproof the organization.
4. Learning and celebrating
 - Opportunity for reflection and systemic awareness as sessions provided a pause in the busy team calendar and sparked the team to offer additional, well-timed stakeholder services.
 - Building constructive behaviors and working agreements based on the insights and learnings uncovered in the process.
 - Increased attention and appreciation for the celebration of successes.

"In writing this note, I was just reviewing our Jamboard and am struck by how much we have grown as a team in our time with Fenneke. We have learned to share our challenges thoughtfully and with care. We have learned to take time to assess and reflect and to take the time to thoughtfully plan as we move forward. This is critical at any period - but particularly at a time of so much uncertainty due to COVID and our reckoning with racial justice."

"This experience has helped me grow as a leader. I have learned where and how to trust more deeply - to share more of myself and my challenges - and to find ways to define roles and responsibilities in ways that help everyone to do their best work. None of this would have been possible without Fenneke's guidance and support. And I am confident that this time with her will have a lasting impact on the organization and on my individual journey."

Daniella Topol, Artistic Director, Rattlestick