

BOOK REVIEW

*The Artful Manager: Field Notes on the Business of
Arts and Culture* by E. Andrew Taylor

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ABSTRACT: Michael DeWhatley reviews *The Artful Manager: Field Notes on the Business of Arts and Culture* by E. Andrew Taylor. **KEYWORDS:** arts management, advice, management techniques, organizational purpose, mission statement, values statement, structure and strategy, innovation, nonprofit management, aesthetic practice, book review, review. DOI:doi.org/10.34053/artivate.11.1.175

In striving to express who we are and what we see, we learn who we are and what we see. And through creative expression and experience, we have an astounding opportunity to share that vision and effort with each other (p. 70).

The multidimensional challenges arts managers have faced in the last two years—and continue to encounter—including not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also the necessary struggle for racial justice, are immense. In times like these, we are all in need of inspiration and new ideas for how we may adapt or cope with our shifting reality. E. Andrew Taylor's book, *The Artful Manager: Field Notes on the Business of Arts and Culture* (arts axis press, 2021), provides that necessary inspiration in the course of its chapters, though the work is considerably broader than it is deep.

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The Artful Manager is a curated compilation of fifty excerpts from Taylor's blog of the same name.¹ These blog entries have been updated and organized into three sections as Taylor explores management techniques, organizational purpose, and structures and strategies for arts groups. Most of these chapters are quite short, two or three pages, and for the most part they represent the author's philosophies rather than data-driven reports or deeply cited theory. However, these entries come from the voice and experience of an industry expert. Despite their brevity, Taylor's entries have something to say.

The first section contains eighteen chapters focused on management practice and, taken as a whole, it seems to call for a revitalization of arts management as an aesthetic practice. Taylor asks managers to resist classical forms of tension with artists in organizational environments. Instead, many of these chapters call for arts managers to develop some form of "aesthetic attention" or to be in some way partners in artistic experience with everyone involved in their organization (p. 16). These first eighteen chapters present portals to new ways of thinking that develop managers with creative expression as part of their vocabulary and intentionality.

Taylor's second collection of fifteen chapters is also focused on intention, but at an organizational and field level as opposed to the individual. Titled "Purpose and Value," this section investigates basic components of nonprofit management. With a nominal focus, this section gives an overview of perceived and literal ownership in the arts. Of the three, this section also feels the most scattered. For instance, one chapter reflects a sardonic hope for the time spent in academic conferences, with the next offering a eulogy for the late Al Prieve, who was the Chair of the Management Department at the University of Wisconsin Madison as well as the founder of The Bolz Center for Arts Administration. Connecting the content of these chapters to the section's titular theme is a bit of a literary stretch.

The final section of the book revolves around "Structure and Strategy," with Taylor calling for increased flexibility in how artistic organizations are formed and sustained over time. For instance, the chapter "A Hammer or a Sponge?" invites arts managers to investigate more meaningfully what their organizations are trying to achieve; metaphorically, are they striving to drive in a nail or soak up water? The focus in these chapters seems to be more entrepreneurial than managerial. Taylor asks questions that are more relevant to people looking to begin artistic enterprises than those who are already working at established institutions.

These chapters, when given space for reflection, can lead readers to a contemplative mindset in which they might apply Taylor's insights to their own work, like an intellectual devotional. The book tightly compresses ideas from organizational theorists, philosophers, economists, and others into bite-sized chunks, which is especially useful as a primer on their overall bodies of work. Rich in metaphor, *The Artful Manager* borrows liberally from an extensive archive of thinkers, poets, and even arts managers; and it often extends the initial thought to a new level. Indeed, part of Taylor's intention with this book, revealed in his

¹ <https://www.artsjournal.com/artfulmanager/>

prologue, is a desire to shift the “language, lenses and assumptions of arts management” with new metaphor and conceptual illustration (p. ix). To that end, this book does present the reader with a codex of both established concepts and potential new avenues of thought. For non-academic readers or audiences who are looking for practical and insightful entries on topics related to artistic management and entrepreneurship, *The Artful Manager* is the book they have been waiting for.

At the same time, this book lacks cohesion or an editorial voice that might otherwise give it a more intentional throughline. While *The Artful Manager* has an introduction in the form of a prologue, it is less than two full pages and contains three paragraphs that are also stated verbatim in Chapter 1. Perhaps new material—not available online—that could introduce the concepts and selections found in each section would have helped codify *The Artful Manager* and given greater weight to its relatively light chapters. Additionally, and perhaps related to its publishing timeline, this 2021 book offers no insights or guidance that speak directly to our continuing realities around the COVID-19 pandemic. More problematically, none of the chapters meaningfully deal with the subject of racial equity. In Chapter 35, Taylor speaks to bias in terms of individuals prioritizing the mind over the body, but he does not have anything to say in fifty chapters regarding the fact that arts entrepreneurship and management privileges some bodies more than others. *The Artful Manager* can move from innovative to outdated by refusing to engage in topics of arts management that feel most pressing at the time of its publication as a whole book rather than a series of online essays that began in 2003.

As field notes go, these re-published blog posts represent the conversational style of the internet, a place where no one has the final word but where there are many first words. Perhaps that is Taylor’s true gift in these pages: the beginning of fifty important conversations. There is certainly value in Taylor’s new metaphors and the introduction of ideas from other fields into arts entrepreneurship that may prove useful to managers seeking to be artful. Indeed, the endnotes section at the end of the book could provide a reading list for anyone who wants to get an MBA in arts administration without paying tuition. Casual readers—or anyone interested in primers on arts management topics, debates, and continuing explorations—will find this book helpful and illuminating.

Disclosure Notice: E. Andrew Taylor, the author of *The Artful Manager*, is also a member of *Artivate*’s editorial board.