Fellowship Council: Good Practice Shared

Angel's Attic - *or* - how RSA Fellows' networks can help local social enterprises – introduced by Tony Hoskins, Chair South Central, text written in collaboration with Alex Watson, Catalyst Programme Manager

The Angels' Attic evening organised by the RSA Fellows' Thames Valley Network in Reading recently gave four organisations each 25 minutes to get input from Fellows on the challenges faced by their start-up social enterprise or increasingly-entrepreneurial charity.

During the evening, we heard from:

- Creative Junction CIC; building an online portal to connect artists in their studios to students in the classroom, artists-not-in-residence
- Reading Playcafes CIC; a community café specifically helping the parents of young children to find safe spaces for themselves and their children to come together
- Real Time Video; helping disadvantaged and corporate communities tell their stories through films and learn some film skills in the process
- Graft; supporting disabled and disadvantaged people into training and employment

It was a success because the RSA Fellows were of great use to the organisations in three main ways. Fellows made offers of specific and practical help on the evening. One Fellow said that her organisation needed Real Time Video to help them communicate within their organisation, making use of a new RTV service to generate income through helping companies get their messages across to their customers or employees. Another Fellow offered Graft a connection to their former employer, a Reading-based multinational company. Referring to its CSR programme, he said "if they're going to eliminate malaria, eliminating some unemployment in Reading shouldn't be too hard."

There will also be many further collaborations made with Fellows providing consistent input into the organisations that pitched. 13 Fellows out of the 30-odd present stepped up at the end to register their expertise to meet with the organisations to give more input. This was like an instant and real-time version of the matching that we do to registrants in the RSA SkillsBank.

I also got the sense that there was a great deal of value in the softer forms of help. There were plenty of instances where the group chipped in with "what you are sounding like you are delivering is x" and the project leader then saying "I've never really thought about as delivering x, but you're right, that's what I do."

One community café owner was reassured that having kept it going through the winter months was evidence enough that he was on the path to success. This softer form of expertise can be hugely important in spurring the hard, long and often lonely work of building a viable social enterprise. I remember Ashoka Fellow Phil Conway saying that the Fellows Social Entrepreneurs Network monthly breakfast socials in London provided him a similar sense that one was part of something bigger, and he would go away with the batteries re-charged.

What were the crucial factors in delivering that success? One key element was the fact that the organisations varied in age, legal structure, service and beneficiaries. This meant there was something to interest each person attending, and there was no sense among the participants that we had exhausted all of the useful advice after the first organisation.

Secondly, the event created an honest, constructive and open atmosphere, facilitated by Tony Hoskins FRSA and Tony Davis FRSA. This was important because charities were exploring new income streams as their public funding ended or was reducing. The head of one organisation summed up this by saying; "I've been running it for 25 years but it feels like I'm running a start-up."

Lastly, Tony Davis FRSA, Executive Director of Social Enterprise Berkshire, worked with the presenters in advance to ensure that they were able to give a concise expression of their project and the challenges it faced. It was this that helped focus the time to achieve the task at a time that for some might already have been the end of a long day.

This was a pilot format for Fellows' Network meetings and after its success it will next stop in Milton Keynes. We think that there are plenty of people out there who want to play this role, linking social entrepreneurs who need input to the diverse and committed RSA Fellows. As well as looking to get RSA Catalyst-supported social entrepreneurs, we look forward to hearing from people affiliated to Social Enterprise UK (like Tony) or with experience of Council-led Community Voluntary Service (CVS) organisations or regional development agencies (RDAs) who want to get input for organisations they have supported.

As I said at the start, we will share resources to help build regular networks meetings such as a toolkit on events of this and from other event formats such as the Networks events with UnLtd in Manchester and the successful launch of a thematic RSA Fellows' network in Edinburgh. The Fellowship Council will also help to share the best-practice for Fellows' network meetings that they encounter in their regions/nations.

Fellows' tools & techniques

"*In my work, I have witnessed incredible potential realised simply through the committed action of creative, inspired citizens. The RSA and its Fellows are poised to accomplish similar ongoing success in communities throughout the world, and I am excited to see what is possible in Chattanooga as we continue to collaborate*"
- Trey Meyer FRSA, Broken Windows Brigade

- How to run Fellows' network meetings
- Varied formats for meetings/workshops
- Getting your message out to the RSA Fellowship
- How to connect with Fellows online (+ live-streamed videos, Vision mobile app)
- Funding your project: RSA Catalyst Fund
- Fellows getting active: projects and enterprises (+ RSA Skillsbank)
- Understanding the structure of the RSA Fellowship
- New Fellows' Evenings
- Fellow-led thematic networks

Access them all here: http://www.thersa.org/fellowship/fellows-facilities/fellowship-resources