

Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

**Art
Works** | Developing
Practice in
Participatory
Settings

Insights for employers, commissioners
and funders in facilitating quality
impacts through participatory arts

Rachel Blanche
November 2014



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Introduction

An analysis undertaken earlier this year for Creative Scotland to capture and crystallise concepts of quality in participatory arts has pulled together evolving perspectives that, combined, embody a paradigm shift in thinking on the issue. Drawing on a number of sources including several ArtWorks studies, the analysis highlights a significant new way of approaching the tricky question of how we can get optimum quality artist interventions in participatory settings.

A key finding is that quality cannot be attributed solely to the artist and the activity undertaken: in fact quality outcomes stem from a broader *process* in which a range of decision makers – *stakeholders* – influence the key conditions necessary to achieve quality. These stakeholders include employers, commissioners and funders, and to some extent participants themselves.

This paper profiles three important insights gained into the nature of the quality and the roles played by these stakeholders. It highlights conditions for quality work that have been identified through a number of targeted ArtWorks studies, including Schwarz (2014) and Dean (2012). A holistic framework that employers and other stakeholders can use for achieving quality is presented. Employers, commissioners and funders of participatory arts work are urged to do what they can to support optimum conditions for quality work by artists with participants. To this end, the paper culminates with recommendations and proposed ways forward.

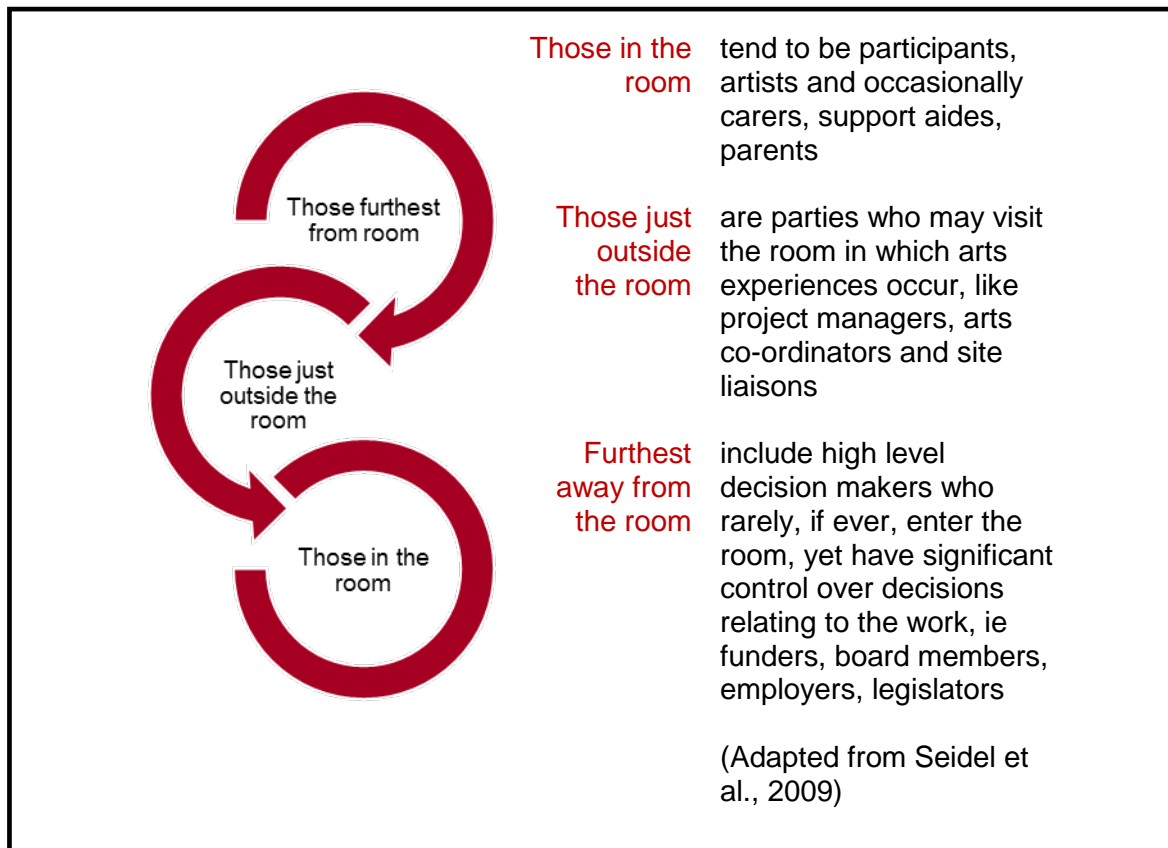
1 Insight One: Decision makers ‘outside the room’ play a significant role in quality outcomes

The importance of partner organisations as commissioners, collaborators and hosts for participatory arts work is gaining increasing recognition. Pivotal findings by researchers Seidel et al. (2009) on the *interconnectedness of decision makers* are that, while artists are at the forefront of delivering arts work and interventions with participants, a great many other wider dynamics directly affect the quality of the experience of those who are engaged ‘in the room’. These dynamics are often controlled by partner organisations or employers who are not directly involved in delivering the arts work and who typically have a different relationship to participants than that of the artist interacting creatively with them.

There are countless decisions that influence the delivery of a participatory arts project and the likelihood that participants will have a high quality experience. Because of the nature of participatory arts and the variety of settings in which it takes place, there are inevitably multiple decision makers as well.

The report by Seidel et al. (2009) characterises three generic groups of decision makers who influence the quality of arts learning experiences: the people **in the room** delivering or engaged in the project or activity; those **just outside the room** closely involved in designing and facilitating the project; and decision makers **furthest from the room** setting organisational standards or parameters and determining resources.

Influence of decision makers on participants' experience



Crucially this detailed study has shown that ***those just outside the room and those even further away who may never, or only rarely, enter the room, have powerful influences on the likelihood that those in the room will have a high quality experience.*** Their decisions are also critical to whether that quality can be achieved and sustained consistently over time and across settings (Seidel et al., 2009).

How does this occur? Those directly engaged in the work (the artist and the participants) tend to make their decisions 'in the moment of the experience'; such decisions relate to the content and nature of the work being undertaken, and are intended to enhance the experience of those in the room. However Seidel et al. (2009) argue that decisions made by those further away from the room are often made well in advance of the moment and, in the case of higher level policies, may affect many participants in multiple projects. Within challenging settings with, for instance, participants with additional needs, it is easy to appreciate the veracity of this observation.

Crucial decisions concern participants, the content and level of engagement, resources, staffing, partnerships and evaluation (Seidel et al., 2009). Such *organisational* and *programme decisions* are normally made by stakeholders outside the room. Problems occur when there is disconnect between those directly engaged in the delivering the work, who experience the realities and needs of the participants and artistic requirements, and those who determine organisational requirements, frameworks and access to resources.

Decisions in each circle affect decisions in the others and, ultimately, the quality of the experiences in the room. Given this reality, Seidel et al. (2009) argue that

'... successful systems of decision making recognize the delicacy and likelihood of mistakes made in the outer circle and provide frequent, open, and dynamic channels

of communication with the explicit purpose of informing the outer circle decision makers.'

There needs to be genuine dialogue across the circles on what the real needs are and what the priorities should be in a specific setting. **Clearly articulated and agreed expectations are therefore a key foundation for quality.**

The challenge for everyone is the degree to which they are in communication, working together to assure not only the quality of the inner circle experience, but also the future of those experiences (Seidel et al., 2009).

Current indications of disconnect

In the past four years, ArtWorks has done a great deal to investigate the realities of working with partners in participatory arts settings, from the point of view of artists. Key findings from artist focus groups report instances where:

- stakeholders influence outcomes in ways that practitioners (whose focus is less likely to be goal-centred) find unsatisfactory
- stakeholders enforce content control where practitioners don't believe this is appropriate (Pheby, 2012)

Results from artist consultations by ArtWorks Scotland highlight similar problems in partnership working in participatory arts, specifically:

- under-developed relationships between artists and host/commissioners;
- unrealistic commissioner expectations; and
- the absence of a common language across different sectors/stakeholder groups (Consilium, 2012)

2 Insight Two: Quality participatory arts work depends on certain conditions which aren't always being met

On top of the revelation that control over quality extends beyond the participatory arts practitioner alone, we now also have a more explicit understanding of what factors or conditions are needed to achieve quality work and quality experiences.

Several studies by ArtWorks have generated useful insights into the conditions for quality in participatory arts. Their findings can be synthesised into what can be understood as the **main preconditions for quality participatory arts work:**

- *Sufficient resources, including fit for purpose environment*
- *Sufficient time, for planning, building relationships and implementing project*
- *Designed and resourced for participants' needs and support*
- *Opportunities to reflect, adapt, evaluate*
- *Realistic aims*
- *Understanding of artist and partner roles*
- *Buy-in and Trust by all parties*

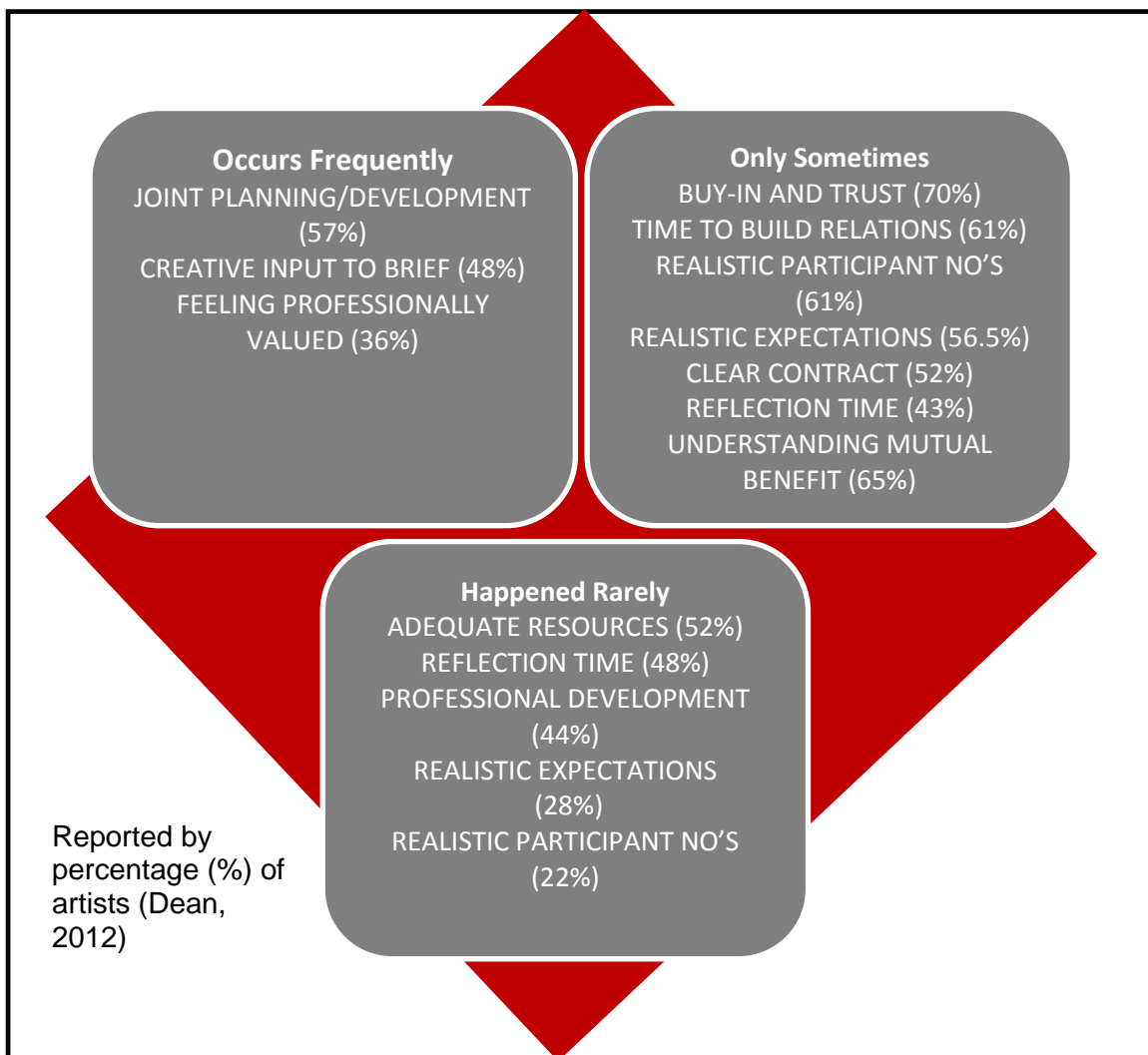
- *Clear and realistic expectations*
- *Democratic decision making (artist-partner-participant)*

(Blanche, 2014 drawing from Lowe, 2011, Dean 2012 and Salamon in Johnstone et al., 2013)

Partnerships and stakeholder dedication emerge as a crucial theme with ‘having “buy in” and trust between all partners/participants’, ‘feeling valued’ by each other, ‘shared processes of working together across planning and evaluation’ and clear and realistic expectations all being *essential* preconditions (Dean, 2012).

While several of the conditions above may seem plainly obvious, for instance having sufficient time, resources and appropriate content, the significant insight revealed through ArtWorks research is that **these preconditions for quality are not always in place** for participatory arts projects, meaning that expectations of quality outputs and outcomes are heavily undermined. When ArtWorks Scotland investigated how often these quality factors occur from artists’ point of view, it found that **many of the essential and important factors occur only *sometimes*, and many happen *rarely*** (Dean, 2012), indicating that there remains much more that can be done to enable quality in participatory arts.

Occurrence of essential and important factors, from artists’ viewpoints



(Diagram from Blanche, 2014, representing data reported in Dean, 2012)

This data was tested further in 2013 by ArtWorks Scotland to gain the perspective from project partners (defined as people who work with artists as employers, managers, commissioners or co-ordinators). While this survey of partners found general consensus on the importance of the factors, there was a significant variation in how often partners perceived these actually happening, with partners reporting greater incidence of key factors in practice than the artists (Dean, 2013).

An important implication of the ArtWorks findings is that **there is a limit** to which artists delivering participatory arts work with partner organisations are able to control important quality factors. Observations by Seidel et al. (2009) on the impact of external stakeholders become particularly relevant in light of this evidence. It seems clear that if we want to foster conditions for quality work and quality outcomes, then such disparities and disconnect need to be resolved.

Crucially, the British Chartered Quality Institute (CQI) holds that when someone is assigned responsibility for quality

'...this means giving a person 'the right to cause things to happen'. With this right should be delegated the authority to control the processes which deliver the output, the quality of which the person is responsible for.'

(CQI, 2013).

If this is accepted, then it means that quality work must be underpinned by realistic expectations and clear lines of responsibility for setting in place the conditions for quality.

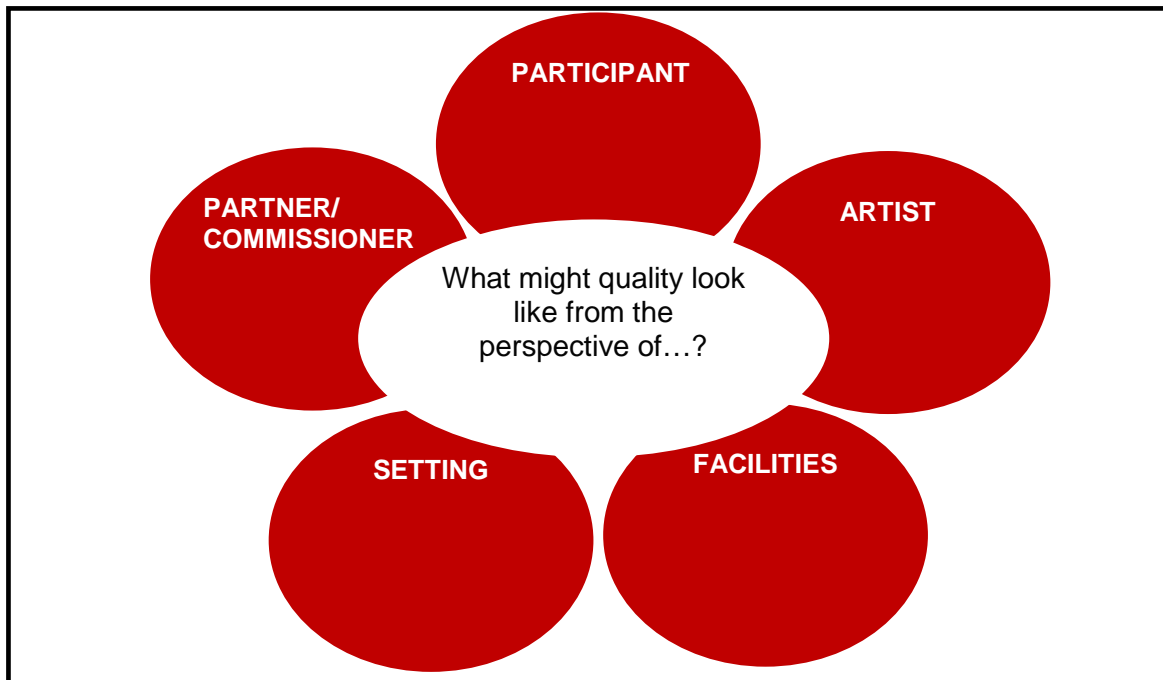
Furthermore, the insight from industry that 'once quality has been built in, subsequent deployment, operation, and maintenance processes must not degrade it' (Marino, 2007) underlines once more the potential negative impact that, in a participatory arts context, the external factors controlled by hosts, partners and other stakeholders can have on the achievement of quality work.

3 Insight Three: Different lenses on quality give rise to diverse stakeholder expectations

Quality is subjective and particularly so when we consider the *expectations and needs of different stakeholders* in participatory work. A holistic approach enables different 'qualities' of each piece of work to be acknowledged, and recognises that experiences and expectations of quality will vary according to the perspective of those involved with the project.

Seidel et al. (2009), studying the arts education context, identified different dimensions of quality experienced by separate stakeholder groups and characterised these as individual 'lenses' through which to view quality. The analysis for Creative Scotland expands on this concept, exploring it within a participatory arts context. Individual lenses are characterised as: participant experience, artist intentions and practice, the commissioner or partner's intentions, the dynamic of the setting and group dynamic, and the nature of the project facilities (Blanche, 2014).

Quality lenses in participatory arts



(Blanche, 2014)

What might different expectations be?

Quality for **participants** concerns depth of engagement and consequent impacts. They are looking for a safe environment in which to experiment and to feel valued and connected to the project (Salamon, 2013). It is important to understand what might improve the participant experience (Schwarz, 2014) and to build in those elements.

Consultations with **artists** show that they seek a positive impact on participants and to 'enable people who are unheard to find their voice' (Lowe, 2011). Artistic challenge, professionalism and integrity are also core motivators (Leighton-Kelly, 2012).

Employers or **commissioners** look for professionalism and the 'quality' of the artists delivering the project, as well as how the project interplays with the culture of the host organisation (Bamford, 2010). They also want positive experiences for their participants: the creation of art is not necessarily a high priority (Sellers, 2014).

In terms of the **setting**, quality factors concern the suitability of the project for the specific context ie healthcare, community. The ways in which participants treat each other, learn with and from each other, and feel about being together are also key quality factors (Seidel et al., 2009).

With **facilities**, factors include the quality of the physical environment or space for the work and the quality of materials.

An important finding from Seidel et al. (2009) is that the quality of any of these elements cannot stand alone; they all contribute to the quality of the experience.

This is borne out by Arts Council England commissioned guidance which highlights different aims and objectives among partners. Its recommendations include:

- *discussing agendas openly*

- *being willing to compromise*
- *being specific about achievable aims*

(Woolf, 2004 as cited by Sellers, 2014)

4 What does this mean? The role of employers, commissioners and funders

What is clear from the research presented here is that quality is influenced significantly by employers, commissioners and funders. The decisions made about resourcing and managing projects have a direct impact on whether or not quality may be achieved. In many ways this is a highly logical statement; the problem lies with the evidence that quality conditions are currently impeded by existing approaches to facilitating the work. Partners need together to help fulfil the conditions that enable the artist to reach for high quality experiences.

On the basis of the findings above, and drawing on the detailed steps mapped out in the Creative Scotland report (Blanche, 2014), we would encourage employers and other stakeholders in participatory work to:

- 1 Set the focus on ensuring that optimum conditions for quality are in place, recognising the impact of these conditions on likely outcomes, and recognising that the responsibility for quality is shared by partners as well as the artist.
- 2 Build constructive partnerships for quality, engaging key stakeholders and decision makers with artists in the complete process, from planning through to evaluation. This requires time and attention, which need to be built into the development and funding processes.
- 3 Identify and acknowledge perspectives on quality from each of the stakeholder perspectives, setting realistic aims and expectations for the project.

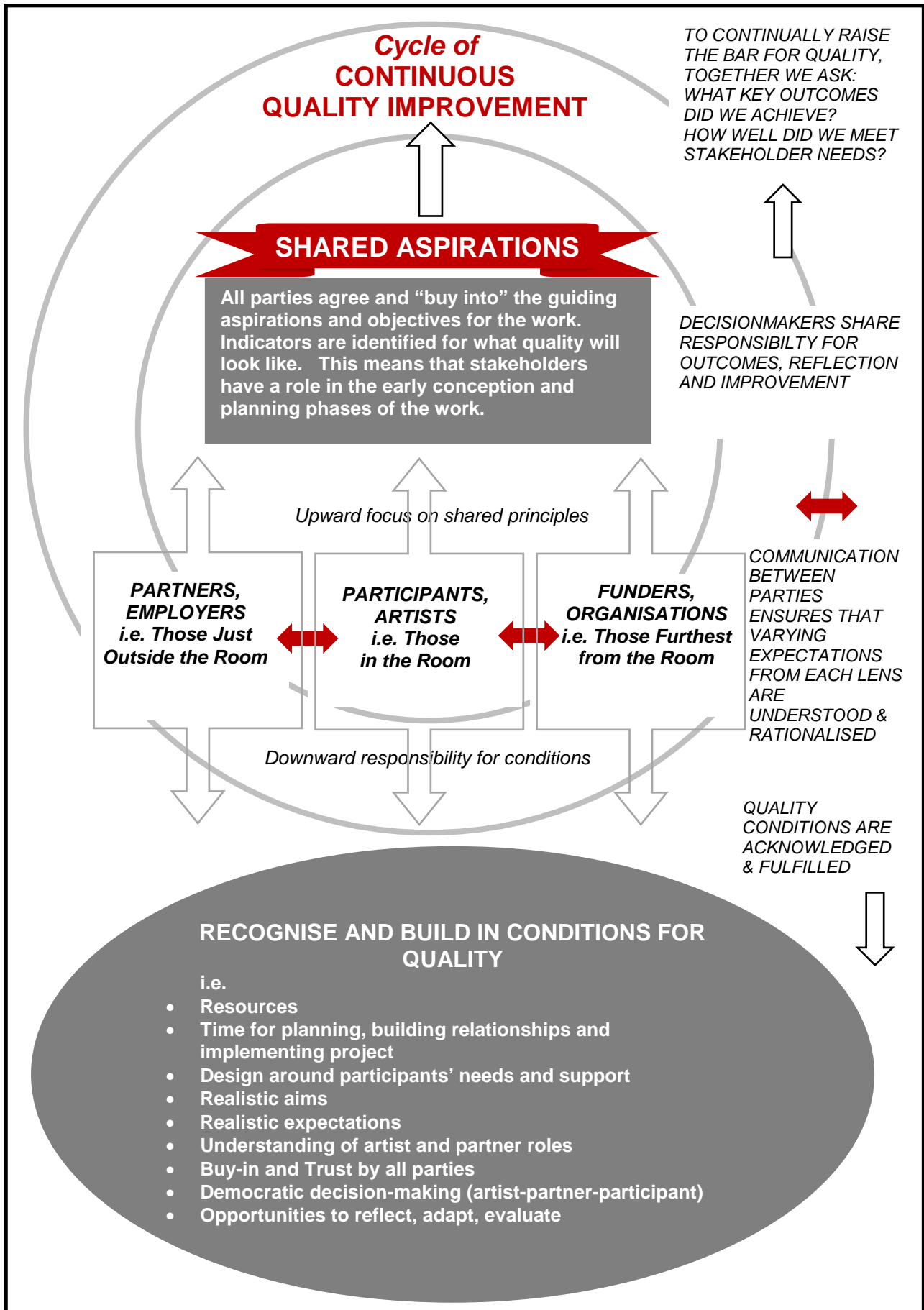
Key to the whole process is **robust and constructive communication between** partners. All parties in projects need to know what is being aimed for, why and how; with a shared understanding of what is trying to be achieved through the work, a shared vision and agreed aspiration. This will provide clear lines of communication on key issues such as aims, intended outcomes and expectations. New insights underline the importance of having **clear guiding principles** and aspirations for the work, enabled conditions and a supportive environment for the work.

It is important to note that ideas about what constitutes quality can and should **vary across settings**, depending on the purposes and values of the programme and its community (Seidel et al., 2009).

Finally, quality needs to be seen as a process open to constant improvement. A holistic framework for fostering quality participatory arts work, drawing all of these insights together, is represented in the integrated diagram that follows.

The insights in this paper, along with the studies profiled here, are presented in greater detail in the report *Developing a Framework for Quality Guidance* (Blanche, 2014), available to view [online](#).

Measures needed to foster quality participatory work



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Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Paul Hamlyn (1926–2001) was a publisher, businessman and philanthropist who was concerned about social injustice and disadvantage – particularly as it affected children and young people, and those ‘outsiders’ seeking to integrate into British society. In 1987 he set up the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for general charitable purposes, and on his death he bequeathed the majority of his estate to the Foundation, making it one of the UK’s largest independent grant-making organisations.

The mission of the Foundation is to maximise opportunities for individuals to realise their potential and to experience and enjoy a better quality of life.

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ArtWorks

ArtWorks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings is a PHF Special Initiative working to improve participatory practice in the arts. It focuses on workforce development, seeking to improve training and development infrastructure for artists at different stages of their careers. The initiative began in 2010/11 and continues to the end of 2014/15.

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