MT Space created the following *Project Field Notes* document in 2024 as part of their Balancing Act Level UP! Pilot Project.

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MT Space
Pathways to Agreement Pilot
Project Field Notes

Project focus: Wrap-around support for MT Space staff and contracted arts workers, as well as onboarding processes for new hires.

Project inspiration: We wanted to create an environment and support structure where people could contribute and get the work done, and also have room for life to happen.

Project Context

At MT Space, we have always considered it a priority to try to decolonize our processes wherever possible. It has been a constant and conscious process to create parallels between our in-studio approaches and our administrative structures, as well as our community engagement. As part of these efforts, we were already implementing many decolonizing wrap-around supports when we joined the Level UP! program. For example: we are task-based, not hours-based and we brought in benefits for the entire team during the pandemic.

Much of the concrete groundwork for these efforts traces back to 2019 at the time of our biennial IMPACT Festival. The festival marked the beginning of a difficult and complicated several years for MT Space that have been pivotal in our evolution. MT Space was left in a devastated state after the festival, with our previous Artistic Director and Founder, Majdi Bou-Matar, and current Artistic Director, Pam Patel, left feeling burnt out and depleted. It took several months for us to recover and see a way forward. We went through a powerful process of dismantling the organization and rebuilding.

Our journey hit another storm when the COVID-19 lockdowns occurred; on the one hand, providing increased time and space to continue our process, but on the other, causing many in our community to spiral into isolation and struggles with mental health.

In 2021, MT Space engaged Amy Balatoni, a Human Resources consultant, for ongoing staff support. We were grateful to have this support in place when we experienced our

greatest loss: the sudden passing of Majdi Bou-Matar in June 2022. Our team continues to grieve and find ways forward with gentleness for ourselves and each other. This profound loss led to serious introspection at MT Space, and encouraged us to participate in Balancing Act's Level UP! program to support caregivers and increase support for special needs and mental health.

Planning and Implementation

Our Level UP! project involved formalizing policies related to compassion and wrap-around support for staff and artists, including mental health responses and preventative measures. When we started the program, we were seeking support in the following areas:

- navigating how best to supporting team members who needed time off;
- communicating with our community around the challenges we were facing;
- helping team members return to work;
- identifying resources to share with team members to help them find supports; and
- collecting and systematizing learning so that we could move forward in a more inclusive, trauma-informed way.

Our involvement with Balancing Act helped lay some solid foundations upon which we continue to build and expand. The process is ongoing.

Moving through grief while continuing to work, we knew we needed to increase our human resource capabilities and support. Before and during Level UP! we engaged Amy Balatoni again to support our processes as we developed a Mental Health Support Plan, created new pathways for hiring and onboarding, and engaged in supportive and decolonizing workplace practices.

Amy brought both legal expertise and a deep care for our team and MT Space's work. She understood the guiding principles behind our mission and effectively aligned her vocabulary and approaches with our values and priorities. Amy has been an invaluable resource, available both to the company as a whole and to individual team members as needed. Her support has been crucial in helping individuals navigate personal accommodations, leading to improved workflow and team efficiency, without turning the process into a burden or a project in itself.

Here is a list of the resources that we worked on or engaged during our Level UP! project:

1) **Mental Health Support Plan**
   This resource was a response to mental health struggles that some team members experienced during the pandemic. It was developed as we were creating return to work plans and it helped to facilitate re-entry. After Majdi's passing, it became an essential resource for our team and has proved to be invaluable in all our activities, from the studio to the office to our community events.

2) **Towards Braiding**
   Towards Braiding, a book by Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti with Sharon Stein, has become a key onboarding resource for our company. It details the work that needs to be engaged with before reconciliation work can begin. It is a powerful, approachable, and systemic way of looking at attitudes, dynamics, and internalized systems that each team member brings to the organization, and provides vocabulary we can use to talk about the organization itself and our process. We ask each new person joining the team to read it and send in a short reflection. We hold biweekly "Difficult Conversations" meetings at MT Space, where we often reference Towards Braiding and we also return to reread it before bigger events, such as the IMPACT Festival. The book provides a foundation from which to assess where we are at individually and collectively and helps guide us to focus on where shifts may be needed. It is an important tool for our self-assessment and also our interactions with artists and the greater community.

3) **Workplace Wellness Statement (from Employee Handbook)**
   We noticed that terms like 'burnout' and 'work-life balance' are often used but not always clearly understood or explained. We decided to provide some concrete examples and suggestions in the handbook and have found that individuals are more empowered, aware, and able to make adjustments earlier to prevent burnout. We also believe that emphasizing the idea that the 'show must go on' is no longer a viable model for arts organizations increases the likelihood that the show *will* go on.

Key conversations

Because we started our project during a time of immense grief and change, we didn't have much time to plan and discuss how and what we would do. The opportunity to expand our relationship with Amy was vital. She was—and continues to be—able to support us in a variety of ways: from providing resources and one-on-one support to ensure compliance with legislative requirements.

Future planning

The capacity we've built over the past two years has strengthened our organization's ability to be proactive in our planning and approaches. Activities such as creating individual safety plans and engaging in difficult conversations have become regular practices, and have even been integrated into our hiring processes for new team members. One of the biggest learnings for us was the importance of implementing changes across the board—we can't afford to isolate methodology or procedure. We've found that initiatives are effective only when applied consistently throughout the entire organization and across all activities.

If we were to do it all again, I would have liked to have a clearer sense earlier on of what "accommodation within reasonable limits" looks like and how to set more consistent boundaries, particularly when addressing conversations around responsibility between team members and the organization.

Language considerations

We have gradually developed a consistent language that reflects our commitment to wrap-around supports. We openly discuss challenges and regularly examine decolonizing resources to critically assess our work methods. Also, our Difficult Conversations meetings help us consciously grow the vocabulary needed to address issues together.

Sustainability

Our efforts to provide wrap-around care and support are ongoing and sustainable. We have built Amy's human resources support package into our budget, and the regular team meetings and trauma-informed culture are here to stay.

Key information and advice

Implementing care and support initiatives is not as daunting as it may seem. Having a clear sense of vision and of values and an understanding of how these initiatives align is an essential part of this process. It's easy to get caught up in the details, so returning to the big picture is very important

We don't need to be best friends to be able to work together, but we DO need to be aligned and clear on what we are working towards. Wrap-around support doesn't necessarily mean warm fuzzies. It means respect and honouring, which, in our experience, results in genuine gratitude.

Other thoughts

We found that creating a sense of wrap-around care required a common vocabulary of openness, vulnerability, and safety. We all know we have each others' backs. We don't need to share details, but we feel comfortable saying, "I'm at reduced capacity today", and the team steps up.

As difficult as the last few years have been, we are grateful that Balancing Act came along when it did. We would not have been able to navigate the challenges we were facing without the supports, insights, and resources that were provided to us through this initiative. The community we were connected with through Balancing Act has proven invaluable and the friendships that have developed with members of the Balancing Act team are wonderful.