

The Future of Leadership
Americans for the Arts Green Paper
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We owe a great debt to the generation of leaders who established the nonprofit arts sector as a viable career choice, one that both offered and required preparation and expertise. Those leaders, who established and shepherded arts nonprofits from fledgling grassroots efforts to massively successful organizations, have in turn mentored and developed the next generation of arts leader. Along with their support, today's nonprofit workforce can access formal education in arts management graduate programs, which have become common nationwide, as well as join professional development organizations that segment us by field, by discipline, by region, and by our level of experience. This means our ability to pool resources—human, intellectual, and community-based—is at an all-time high. It also means that we, like our sector, are accustomed to—and thrive on—change.

That's fortunate, because our sector is in constant change. In the last twenty-five years, much of this has been due to technology, with its great leaps forward that have radically altered both the way we get work done as well as how we communicate with our constituents and with our colleagues. With the increased education and awareness of the nonprofit model, we've learned that in order for our organizations to thrive, we have to think with a mission and behave like a business. Borrowing standards, practices, and policies from our for-profit colleagues have been an essential part of the professionalization of our sector, and it has ensured the continued success of many nonprofits. We must *not* be “nonprofit” in the sense that our businesses make no income; instead, we must be “not-for-profit,” an important distinction.

As leaders, we have learned not to fear change, but to embrace it. The future of leadership must do more than just embrace change, however; it must anticipate it, rely on it to push our organizations forward. We have identified several effective strategies to implement change management into organizations as part of healthy life cycles.

Conventional wisdom has been encouraging leaders to become well-rounded, being “competent” in all areas of management and leadership, but we ask why this should be so. Competence is rarely invigorating, nor does it inspire change; it encourages stasis. As in physics,

when all variables are held constant, the system remains inert. The last ten years have demonstrated that the world in which we live and work is anything but inert, that change is pandemic, and that the speed with which change occurs has only increased. In the life cycles of organizations, different skills will be needed at different stages. In times of growth and expansion, an entrepreneurial leader can be visionary and motivational to the constituency. In times of stabilization, a more administration savvy leader can steady the ship. In times of external change (such as the recent recession), resourceful and collaborative leaders can be most effective. It is a rare individual who can be entrepreneurial, bureaucratic, and collaborative all at the same time, but it is sometimes possible for a single individual to evidence these skills in a single tenure. But we hold that this individual is a rare find.

Small organizations—the vast majority of our sector—sometimes fear change, particularly staffing changes, because vacant positions prevent work from being done and knowledge from trickling down into databases and organizational files. Instead of fearing staff attrition, we should incorporate it into our organizational goals and visions. While the traditional, even corporate, ideal is to create professional growth opportunities for staff from within, the reality is that smaller nonprofits will not have this luxury. The fluidity of staff and projects will be acknowledged, and even embraced. Strategic plans provide the best sense of what kind of staff and leader an organization will need for a five to seven year period. Based on the goals and objectives of their plans, organizations should both capitalize on the strengths of their particular leader and make arrangements to staff the organization with the necessary skills to carry out the work ahead.

We foresee more and more situations wherein employees and organizations can create mutual “win-win” scenarios that involve a three to five year employee commitment (shorter term employment) to pull the organization toward a specific goal. For example, an organization beginning a branding process should invest in a multiyear commitment to a design professional who seeks to build a portfolio that will further her own career agenda; at the end of the period, the employee can move on (and up) while the organization brings in an employee whose skills will stabilize the brand rather than continue to innovate it. The trend in our culture means workers will have more jobs in their lifetimes, and this is because people are constantly seeking education,

training, and new opportunities to grow and develop, as well as to advance to positions of greater responsibility in their careers. Because arts organizations can be small or specialized, it could take years, even a decade before an employee would hope to move up the ladder in one organization. We need to encourage transition between organizations as a means to keep all our organizations fresh, vibrant, and forward thinking.

As leaders, we can spark change and development in our organizations by creating and maintaining smart staff development programs and evaluation processes that are employee-focused. We agree that some organizations cannot match salaries of our for-profit peers and thereby risk losing talented and effective labor to other sectors, so the strategy of including staff development and training as benefits might be viewed as an important opportunity for bright, advancement-minded individuals. Evaluation programs that are employee-minded stress the importance of skills and development needs, not “successes” and “failures.” For all staff, not just leaders, 360-degree reviews provide a panoptic sense of their impact and effectiveness. This practice also encourages employees to be reflective not only about their performance, but about how the effect the organization as a whole. This kind of external concern, this fundamental self-awareness, is an important trait of a good leader and often one of the first to develop.

Collaborate and participative leadership strategies—a flat-organization structure in which staff make concerted contributions to the organization’s leadership—can also serve a staff development function while building in a means for seamless succession. The win for organizations when they employ collaborative leadership strategies is that they ultimately plan for succession. By observing them first hand, employees learn the skills and qualities of good leadership. They will appreciate the increased investment in their abilities, and as leaders, we should not fear losing this expertise to other organizations. It is certain in our future employees will leave organizations for better opportunities. We must accept that. But we should not let attrition cripple our approach to maximizing the time we *do* have with our staffs because this ultimately only hurts our own organizations. In addition, by contributing to the skill development of the field, we cultivate a healthy and savvy sector workforce of peers who will buoy the nonprofit arts in our country. The camaraderie of the field will continue to be important as it has

in the past, and our networks of associates, mentors, and mentees will only become more essential as technology makes us able to collaborate over great distances.

Lastly, we must confront, without fear, significant organizational change. Whenever a for-profit industry bubbles in a period of great expansion and growth, everyone accepts that some of them will fail, will close. We, too, must accept this of ourselves. As more and more arts nonprofits have developed, so has the competition for financial resources, for funding. It's possible that, like for-profit business, the market and/or the community cannot sustain the sheer number of organizations coming into existence. Looking ahead, some of our organizations will close. Some will forge cooperative partnerships with other nonprofits, while others will seek alliances with for-profit colleagues. Some organizations will merge to pool resources and missions. And some will continue to grow. The nonprofit life cycle includes this, plans for this. Even when it will be difficult to do so, as leaders, we must make these difficult decisions.

It may seem oversimplified, but the only consistent aspect of leadership will be the necessity of change leadership. We foresee a future of arts management wherein arts leaders do not remain in their positions for decades unless they are able to evolve with their organization's change needs. It could be that the relationship Executive Director and Managing Director (or other second-in-command) will become even more essential and that it is through staff evolutions in these positions that we will see the most effective use of change leadership. For most of our workforce, it will mean job transition, in the interest of skill building and leadership development, will be the primary goal rather than dedication to a single organization or cause. We can see reflections of this in our for-profit peer organizations as well, meaning that our vision of the future of nonprofit leadership is in line with trends in other sectors as well.