

Cross-Training Across Generations: Current Challenges in Arts Administration

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A new crop of bright, talented individuals are rising in the ranks of the art administration sector. Often dubbed “emerging leaders,” this group is typically defined as under 35 years old, working in the field less than 5 to 10 years. I fall decidedly within this definition, yet I remain unsure what it really means to be an emerging leader, and where this designation might take me. I spoke with some of my peers, mentors, supervisors, and other stakeholders in the field to help me explore the nuances of this concept. What I found is through research and surveys, arts organizations have identified the apparent gap in age and experience between established arts leaders and their successors as a major issue affecting the potential growth and sustainability of the arts sector. Those I spoke with were eager to talk about the challenges of this issue—which there are far too many to squeeze onto this page—and the future of this pocket of the work force.

There are more questions than answers at this point, but most agree that a few salient issues will shape this transition: reevaluating the internal structures that non-profits use operationally; allowing technological innovation to streamline administrative tasks; and trusting that asking questions can lead to better answers and more support.

Assessing Structures and Models

Most organizations currently support a traditional model for upward movement, from entry-level, to mid-level, to management, to executive. But are these structures best for the field as we consider this fundamental shift in leadership? Emerging also means expansion outward, which is what many next-generation leaders are seeking. Jeanne Sakamoto, senior program officer at the James Irvine Foundation believes “it is important to look at professional development broadly, for example, not everyone in a mid- or entry-level position covets the CEO position.” By eliminating hierarchical strategies of leadership succession, this next generation becomes able to grow their skills and define leadership in new ways.

Some of the new generation believe strongly that this hierarchical structure is outdated, dysfunctional, or unsustainable. Many non-profits don’t operate like corporations, yet they assume similar staffing structures; the new logic is that arts administrators should take as much creativity in their administrative tasks, job descriptions, and career tracks as the artists they support.

Marc Vogl, program officer at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, opines that the next generation is “very comfortable working collaboratively. They don’t profess to know all the answers and are willing to open up and say, ‘I would like to try to solve this problem or take leadership on this issue, with other people.’” Many young administrators desire a new kind of work model based on interest and sharing rather than position title. Instead of an organization identifying employees by their job descriptions only, perhaps they can share, explore, and manage many aspects of each other’s tasks based on their unique skill set, experience, and interest. Each individual would hone multiple skills and have a more integrated knowledge of all operations.

In this interest-based structure, tasks can be assigned based on time allotment. For example, managing website development and maintenance might take 10 hours per week. Rather than assign this task to an already overworked full-time communications or IT employee, a manager could ask the staff at large for someone to add the project to their workload. Whoever wants to refine their web-based skills can offer to dedicate the 10 hours. Promotions would be a thing of the past because more emphasis would be placed on equal value for all aspects of the operation.

Personally, I feel fulfilled and challenged by my job at Dancers' Group through a working model of this interest-based, cross-training system. I may not get paid as much as my for-profit-sector peers, but I am nurtured and supported in a different way: through constant performance reviews, daily feedback and dialogue with co-workers, and unending opportunities to voice my opinions and interest. I am developing skills in and confidence with multiple facets of the workplace that will easily translate into other jobs, projects, or fields.

Trusting Technology

We all live the reality that advances in technology are rapid and important to the way we do business, especially in the Bay Area, home to such interconnective giants as Google, Apple, Yelp, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Digg, and more. This region of the country is known for innovation and creativity in utilizing technology to further business and streamline work operations.

Younger generations typically have a greater facility with new technologies, causing a rift between generations already struggling to see eye-to-eye. "In the last 20 years, technologies have moved so quickly that they are outpacing normal rates in generational learning," explains Kegan Marling, program director at Dancers' Group. "In the past, the process by which you learned skill sets was a slower process than skill sets were changing."

It is imperative that the non-profit sector stay open to the newest, freshest, strangest ideas that come along, and younger employees are usually the first to identify these new ways of approaching old tasks. Technology is one component in the leadership shift where the next generation can thrive. Multitasking capabilities, information sharing, and new advances in hardware can be directly applied to streamlining modes and models of the past.

Asking the Question

Many individual and entrepreneurial arts organizations that were started in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, by an influx of government support and funding, are still thriving today. But the individuals who had a vision, who built their organizations around their own cohorts, peers, and interests, are retiring. What happens when (or if!) these established leaders leave their passion projects—now professionally developed organizations, to a new generation—one that approaches art, work, and life very differently? The answer to this question will undoubtedly play out over time, and as it does we must talk to each other, share ideas, and continue to ask questions.

As Sakamoto observes, the key to addressing this founder's syndrome conundrum is professional support and mentorship: "There are always going to be emerging leaders. There are challenges that can be met through monetary support, but [it] also requires a cultural shift."

Just as younger generations have new ideas about using technology and professional integration in the workplace, the established leaders have so much to teach the next generations about leadership and management.

Cross-generational support and mentorship is essential. The up-and-comers must assert their desire and ideas for professional development. Julie Potter, dancer, writer, and company manager for Liss Fain Dance, describes cultivating these relationships on her own time: “I have been gathering sticks and berries, this toolbox of skills, for whenever I might need or want them, figuring out a personal board of directors—people to engage about certain areas. [It may] not be a formal mentorship, they might not even know that you are seeing them as a resource or inspiration.”

Similarly, established professionals need to trust the fresh ideas and tools of the next generation. “People trusting me along the way to step up to the challenges was a big part of my leadership development,” says Anne Dunning, chair of Dance/USA’s Emerging Leaders in Dance Task Force. “What [people] need most to continue to progress and be challenged is fresh opportunities and perspectives. I was very fortunate to have people who gave me opportunities that expanded my professional horizons.”

Support for the next generation is materializing, and it comes in many forms: funders like the Irvine Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, and the Center for Cultural Innovation are building new, small grant programs to aid individuals’ and organizations’ professional development; the Emerging Art Professionals/San Francisco Bay Area group, facilitates peer connections through mixers, panel discussions, and events—they also have a new fellowship program to help further “new competencies, skills and sensitivities that are adaptive, engaging and relevant”; groups like Dance/USA’s Emerging Leader Task Force and Americans for the Arts’ Emerging Leader Network continue the conversation through research, surveys and networking events.

It is a boon to the field that arts administration professionals, by nature, are creative. And it is my hope that we will use our creativity to evolve and cultivate a fresh approach to all parts of the field. The questions are clear, now it is up to all generations to work together and ensure the dialogue continues—to create sustainable and progressive art making, but also to maintain the integrity of the field, to serve our constituents better, and to strengthen civil support of the arts and the culture we know and love best.