

A Look at the Future: EXPECTATIONS OF EMERGING LEADERS

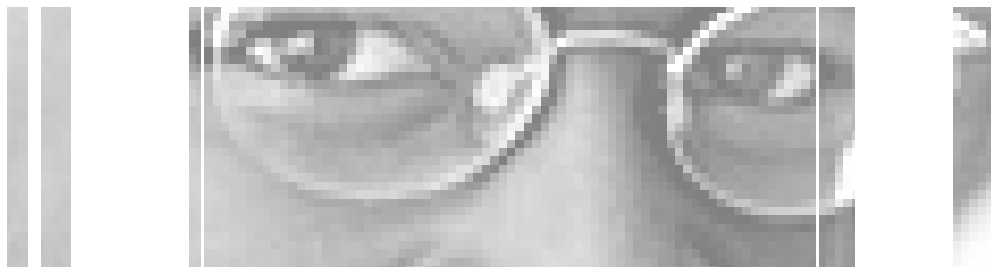
IS THE YOUNGER GENERATION DIFFERENT?

One of the questions posed at the beginning of this research was whether there has been a generational shift in the attitudes and motivations of arts management professionals that may have an impact on the replacement of the baby boomers currently leading arts organizations.

- *One concern is that younger people may be less driven by passion for art or less socially conscious, and therefore unwilling to accept the working conditions and financial compensation structure common in the arts today.*
- *Another issue is whether there is adequate professional training in the arts and, conversely, whether the emergence of arts management programs and degrees may be narrowing the field and eliminating some of the passion and dedication brought to organizations by leaders with other backgrounds.*
- *Lastly, there is a concern that younger professionals find the executive director position unattractive or see too many barriers to achievement of this goal, and may seek other career opportunities rather than go after positions when they become vacant.*

To explore these issues, the group of emerging leaders was questioned closely on their career plans, attitudes, and expectations, and the outsiders interviewed individually were asked about their views on the future of arts leadership in general and the younger generation in particular.

Results of this exploration show that while younger professionals in the arts are indeed different from their elders in some ways, they are remarkably similar in others.



EMERGING LEADERS ARE DEDICATED TO THE ARTS

Although there is discussion about high staff turnover in arts organizations, the individuals recruited as emerging leaders for this research were a stable group. Almost all had been with their current employers for five years or more, and those who had changed jobs more recently seemed to have made a carefully planned move into a position with more responsibility and more growth opportunity.

When asked what they like about their jobs, and whether they plan to remain involved in the arts, emerging leaders echoed the former executive directors, describing their love for the arts and their desire to make a significant contribution to society.

“You help steer an organization, which, in theory, gives back to the community. Most of us are here because we think we are giving back to the community somehow. We’re not here to make money, because very few, even at the executive director level, make significant money relative to other fields.”
(emerging leader)

“My career plans are definitely in the arts. I’m at the point where . . . I’m looking at graduate schools. I’m going to do that, and then when I’m done, I’ll decide exactly what to do, but in the arts, for sure.”
(emerging leader)

“It’s also the enjoyment of the job—the . . . interactions that you have. I think that’s why some of us stay, because we really enjoy what we are doing.” (emerging leader)

THE STARVING ARTIST IS AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS PASSED

In spite of their interest in the arts and their desire to have a long-term career in the field, emerging leaders were vocal about their financial expectations for the future. While they understand that there may be limitations on what they can expect to earn in an arts career, they are unwilling to accept a meager salary for the privilege of arts involvement.

“I want to make a living. I want to make a decent living, absolutely. There’s no doubt about that. But being in a nonprofit, without fund-raising, we would not be there, and when you’re in an environment where you’re not making enough money to pay your own salary, you’re not going to get paid as much. It’s fairly basic.” (emerging leader)

“I don’t believe in sacrificing myself for the arts. As much as I like the arts, I don’t believe the arts are the non plus ultra of society. I believe in food and medicine and housing. The arts are important, but to me, anyway, it’s not a religion.” (emerging leader)

PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE MUST COMMAND FAIR COMPENSATION

For this group, their high level of education and professional training justify a professional level salary. Holders of master's degrees seem especially concerned with finding jobs that value their training and compensate them accordingly.

“When you’re managing a budget of a million dollars, you don’t want to be getting paid thirty thousand. It just isn’t right.” (emerging leader)

“I think if you’re going to be a midsize or large organization and you want it to thrive, you have to give people incentives to stay. If someone can go across the street and make more money being a secretary, why wouldn’t they go across the street and get a midlevel job there?” (emerging leader)

Also, there is a strong belief that the only way to raise the salaries in arts organizations is for arts professionals to hang tough and demand fair compensation. To do less is to perpetuate the problem, a losing course of action for everyone.

“I just don’t buy into the victimization that has been going on for so many years about administration in the arts, that it pays so little. To me, if it pays me a wage I cannot live on, I have to leave. I have to ask for a salary I feel comfortable with. To do anything else is not good for me, and it’s not good for the organization.” (emerging leader)

“It goes back to the myth of the starving artist, and I, for one, don’t appreciate that. I don’t appreciate the ivory tower artist myth either. I think it’s time we got rid of both of those.” (emerging leader)

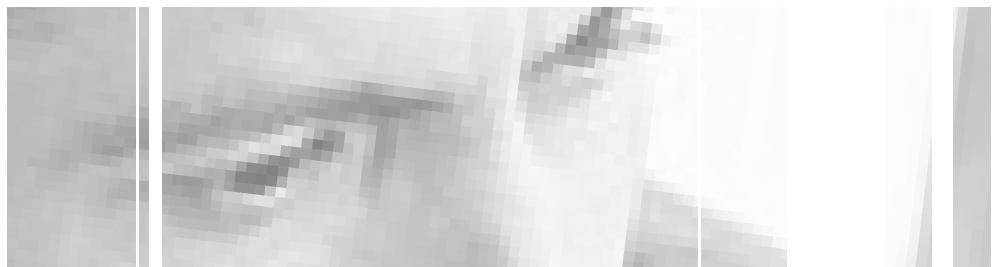
“I think if you stay on a salary you can’t live on, you further assist the marginalization of the arts. We have to be really strong if we’re going to change this.” (emerging leader)

THERE’S NO CLEAR PATH TO MOVING FORWARD IN THE ARTS

In addition to their frustrations over salary issues, emerging leaders are frustrated by the lack of a clear career path. Plans for the future are difficult to settle on, because it’s never clear where the next opportunity will come from.

“I’d like to be an executive director. The thing about the arts is, it’s very hard to know where that’s going to be. For now, in Chicago, there’s a lot of new people, so it’s really a matter of keeping your eyes on job opportunities nationally—talking to people, making connections—and then when the right job comes, you move.” (emerging leader)

“When you get to a certain level, it’s hard to find out what associate directorships or deputy directorships might be out there if I wanted to move to a different kind of arts organization or to a bigger place.” (emerging leader)



STRUCTURE ENCOURAGES TURNOVER

The small size and flat hierarchies of most arts organizations compound the problem of defining a successful career path. It is difficult to move forward within a single organization, so strategic job changes are essential for progress.

“Most of the hierarchies are so flat that you can’t progress more than a few steps until you have to make a move to another organization.” (emerging leader)

“One of the realities in most arts organizations, especially if you’re at sort of the midlevel, is that you’ll hit a certain level and the director or deputy director will plan on being there for ten or fifteen years, and you know that once you have made your mark, you’re going to have to leave in order to advance. I picture my next job as being in a smaller place so I can have a larger role. I think that’s how most people go. They start out in a midsize or larger organization and then they step down in size to go [up] to the next level.” (emerging leader)

RACIAL BARRIERS HAMPER MINORITY PROGRESS

Another issue on which the emerging leaders agreed was that although midlevel jobs have become more open to racial and ethnic minorities, there are still strong barriers for nonwhites who want to move into high-level leadership positions. Since more than half of the participants in this group were black or Latino, this issue was of considerable importance. Unfortunately, no one seemed to have found a solution for the problem other than to keep moving forward and hope that things eventually change.

“If you look at the top leadership of mainstream arts organizations, no one will be a person of color. Also, development departments are lily-white. Development is especially sensitive to that. They think, goodness, we’re going to have this guy with this accent talking to all those high-powered board members. It’s not explicit, but even in organizations that talk about diversity, the barriers are very strong.” (emerging leader)

ARTS MANAGEMENT DEGREES CARRY BOTH PROS AND CONS

Of the ten participants in this session, three had master's degrees in arts management, and one was about to return to school for this degree. The others were pursuing the more traditional path of on-the-job training supplemented with workshops, seminars, and occasional courses on topics of importance.

There was no consensus as to which approach was wiser or more likely to lead to success. The degrees are still too new to know how essential they will be in the future. Some think it's better to be safe than sorry, while others are reluctant to waste time in school.

"[Not having a degree] could be a problem in the future. For funders and people outside the organization, there may be an expectation that an executive director will have a master's in arts administration degree." (emerging leader)

"Because it's a new degree and so many of the older people in the field don't have it, there's a gap in understanding [about] what the value of the degree is." (emerging leader)

"It depends on the environment you are in. I got my degree in New York, and I could look around at almost any institution in the city and find someone from my school. I might not get a job there, but I could at least call somebody from my program and make a contact. In Chicago I think there are . . . many fewer people with a master's in arts management." (emerging leader)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CAN BE HARD TO COME BY

Lack of advancement opportunities can create an organizational culture that does little to foster professional development. Leaders of the organization may not be trained in management disciplines, may be unable to pass on their knowledge, or may not value management skills.

"I don't think it's so much a matter of degree as much as of recognition that you have to learn certain things. I have the impression that most executive directors manage pretty much by instinct. I doubt that many [of them] would go out and buy a book on management by objectives. They would go buy a book on art history but not one on management, and that's such an important part of the job." (emerging leader)

"I think there are so many creative people in this field, it almost takes an 'Aha!' experience to realize, in talking about management, that you're not giving up your creativity by getting involved in that." (emerging leader)



MENTORS ARE IMPORTANT BUT RARE

For the most part, members of this group said they had mentors who had been important influences on their career development, but that forming and sustaining mentor relationships is difficult. Sometimes a former boss or coworker assumes the role, which can be sustained after the work relationship ends by regular meetings at professional conferences or social events, but formal attempts at finding mentors seem to fail. The only solution, the group said, is to take charge of your own career development.

“Nobody has time to develop anybody. To say, ‘this kid has fire, I’m going to develop her because she has potential to become something’—that takes time and most people don’t have the time or the expertise to do that. So you get hired for your job, you do it, and then when it’s time, you leave. That’s all there is to it.” (emerging leader)

“I’ve come to realize that you have to be really motivated to go after some things. . . . [T]here is no one else who’s going to know what you need better than you do.” (emerging leader)

LACK OF EXPOSURE TO BOARDS HINDERS ADVANCEMENT

Below the deputy director level, only those in development jobs seem to have opportunities for regular contact with board members and others who might help their career advancement. Since executive directors spend much of their time interacting with the board, lack of exposure becomes an obstacle to further growth.

“I run when I know it’s time for the board meeting. They are very difficult for me. The main part of it is the generation gap. We have older board members who have certain ideas about what we should do, and at times when they come up with their ideas, I think, wait, that was thirty years ago. This is the twenty-first century, let’s bring that up a notch. So it’s very hard for me, and I find myself becoming very impatient.” (emerging leader)

Lack of contact not only prevents midlevel staff from becoming comfortable dealing with the board but shortchanges the organization and robs boards of opportunities to spot emerging leaders within their ranks.

“We twisted the arms of the press and marketing directors to sit through a board committee meeting. The synergy and buy-in from everyone around the table was completely different from the past, and the marketing campaign that came out of that meeting was ten times better than what we had come up with the year before.” (emerging leader)

“Those connections are really important for the institution, not just for the individuals who might be getting access and learning something. When the leader steps down, that board needs to have faith in everybody that’s already there. People need to know that things will continue.” (emerging leader)