

Some Thoughts about **SUCCESSION**

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Sometimes I think being the executive director of a not-for-profit arts organization is a fate I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. At other times, I think I'm the luckiest person around to be in this position—and sometimes I wonder what I'm going to do when I grow up.

When I grow up . . . Now that's really a bit odd, since I've been working in the arts community since 1973 and in many ways "cut my teeth" in this field. Yet now, as I'm a bit longer in the tooth, I've been increasingly wondering what I have to do to ready myself, my organization, my board, and my colleagues for whoever will follow me.

I'd like to believe that I'm still making a difference in my job and still learning, so the work I hope to do for the New York Foundation for the Arts and for the field itself in the years ahead will still keep growing, but I have no illusions that I am indispensable.

September 11, the AIDS crisis, and the everyday reality of the fragility of life do have a way of forcing you to confront basics. I realize that underlying my deepest concerns about succession is my need to come to grips with my own mortality. Like preparing a will, planning for succession has to be viewed as an act of responsibility, ensuring strategic continuity and future possibilities.

Accordingly, as I've been thinking through the next phase of my life, preparing myself for the future and preparing the way for my successor have to be among my most critical tasks. I must think about it as seriously as I can. Just as I would work with the board and staff to develop a multiyear plan for developing and implementing any new initiative, so too have I begun to plan as energetically as possible for succession as a multiyear process in our strategic thinking.

Succession is not a subject most of us want to deal with. It raises difficult issues of personal and professional identity and accountability for which there are not always clear answers. It raises questions about the depth, commitment, and training of the people next in line in our organizations and the readiness of the people in our field who need to come after us. It raises questions about what we'll do next with our professional expertise if we fear losing our value once we are no longer heading an organization.

While thinking about the issues associated with succession for my organization and myself, I've realized that the graying of the field mirrors the rise—especially since the mid-70s—of the not-for-profit arts industry in this country. The growth of the arts community throughout the country has been well documented. But the fragility of the infrastructure to support this growth is less well known, and the resulting workforce issues of our industry are just beginning to be discussed. We are facing a generational change for which we are not well prepared. Indeed, I am not sure that most of us have taken the time to see what is happening.

The passion of the sixties generation combined with catalytic funding for many arts organizations in the country—particularly the CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) jobs program—gave rise to the creation of many new administrative positions. The concept of organizational development took hold, and positions grew as programs and responsibilities increased. But despite the growth, the field too often remained undercapitalized and understaffed, often stretching perilously to meet constant crises. In order to advance in terms of salaries and professional growth, many administrators often moved from one organization to another. Other people decided to stick around and try to commit to a career over many years in the not-for-profit arts. But given the combination of the economic

vicissitudes of this field and the AIDS pandemic, we lost far too many talented people who were poised to be in the next generation of leadership.

Many of us could see the pattern, but we were so busy navigating the latest financial and/or political crises that it was often hard to focus on long-term issues. Fees for artists were often less than adequate; administrative salaries and fringe benefits for artistic staffs were less than desirable. Yet the fervor of surviving one crisis after another and of building a field, an organization, and a community fired the imaginations of my generation of arts administrators and artists. If a leadership void was developing, we believed people would still be attracted to work in this field as we had been. We would worry about funding inequities and inadequacies tomorrow.

I have always been proud to have grown up with this generation of arts administrators and to have been part of the enormous accomplishments and extraordinary leadership that have strengthened the arts in this country for over thirty years. I now realize that by postponing the needs of tomorrow, we have collectively delayed the appropriate and necessary continuity our individual organizations and our field as a whole require. We have not taken enough of the steps necessary for the roots of our achievements to grow and mature.

Appropriate compensation at all levels remains a major issue, which must be addressed. It is still difficult for people to think about retiring when the retirement plans of too many organizations are either inadequate or nonexistent. Moreover, it is often difficult for people making below-market salaries and balancing immediate financial needs to think about setting up individual retirement plans. For people to stay in this field or to train for succession, we must have salary structures that allow for adequate compensation and professional training. In order to strengthen the next

generation of leaders, our organizations must build capacity and draw on our professional strengths—especially our history of creativity and innovation.

These workforce issues, among others, are some of the most critical challenges our field must face, particularly in small and mid-sized organizations. Our ability to attract, maintain, and sustain professionals over the long term is an overall industry need that requires new ideas, collaborations, and certainly additional resources. It also requires the commitment of all of us in our field—veterans, midlevel and entering administrators, boards, funders—to think about succession not only for ourselves as individuals or organizations but for our field as a whole.

Sharing leadership is another key issue that must be discussed as we think about succession. In a field often dominated by dynamic, idiosyncratic leaders, it can be difficult for others to grow and develop. It is critical to the succession process, within our individual organizations and within the field, that new voices be heard and that leadership roles be given to the next generation eager to contribute and to serve.

In this process, it is also important to find a creative role for “veterans.” The challenges our field faces in the years ahead demand the energies of as many talented people as we can find. While we all do a great deal of informal mentoring, we need to develop more formal and effective mentoring initiatives for our field in order to share the lessons of the growth of the arts in this country in a comprehensive way.

There is so much giving and sharing, teaching and learning, that we need to give to our organizations, our field, and ourselves. **Succession is both inevitable and challenging. It allows us the opportunity for new and more inspired thinking and, ultimately, is our gift to one another, from generation to generation.**