

# BARRIERS TO GREATER INVOLVEMENT OF Young African Americans AS ARTS ORGANIZATION LEADERS

*Lauren I. Gumbs*

*Wayne C. Winborne*

Senior leadership in arts organizations across the country finds itself at a critical juncture in the early years of this new century. A change in the available pool of potential leaders is coming, driven by a profound set of demographic shifts that have been the subject of much discussion and debate. That the population of the United States is becoming more racially diverse and at the same time more generationally polarized is widely acknowledged. Current census projections estimate that people of color will become the majority of the population of the United States by the middle of this century, if not sooner. Moreover, people 65 and over now outnumber people 25 and under for the first time in this nation's history. What seem to be poorly understood are the full implications of these rapid and extreme demographic changes.

This paper will examine the implications of these changes for African American leadership in arts organizations. It will focus specifically on the barriers to increasing the involvement of young African Americans in the management and oversight of mainstream arts organizations and the risks associated with failing to develop a cadre of leaders from this community. It will also suggest a few strategies that arts organizations can employ to ameliorate this situation and identify opportunities for change.

This paper also seeks to complement the other writings that comprise this project and help illuminate the various challenges and opportunities associated with leadership succession. Finally, it is hoped that this paper will stimulate discussion and exploration of the need to increase the involvement of African Americans in leading arts organizations by highlighting a few key issues for serious consideration.


It should be noted that this paper focuses on African Americans solely. This focus was not taken to imply that

African Americans' situation is radically different or better than that of other groups. Rather, the focus on African Americans is intended to typify the challenges of creating a representative arts leadership cadre by highlighting the group, other than women, that has made the greatest gains in diversifying leadership in arts organizations over the last 30 years or so. Many of the barriers that are identified herein—as well as their underlying causes—apply equally well to other groups that are underrepresented in leadership positions: Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, women, and young people of all races.

This paper is organized into four broad sections: (1) a brief overview of leadership and the difficulty of leadership change in general; (2) a look at African Americans and their role in the arts; (3) specific barriers to greater African American involvement in arts organizations; and (4) suggestions for change.

## LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

Organizational change has been described as one of the most difficult processes to undergo. When this change is precipitated by a transition in top leadership, the process can be excruciating. Often, the very nature of leadership demands that an individual excel at managing change, and yet most people crave stability in their organizations. Indeed, stability is one of the hallmarks of successful organizations. Paradoxically, the stability that leaders strive for, that organizations must have to survive over the long term, is a factor that makes leadership change so difficult. Staffs find change disruptive and tend to resist it. Boards dislike change for the same reason and because funders typically are unwilling to support unstable (i.e., changing) organizations. From this perspective, change is to be avoided or, at best, tolerated; certainly it is not to be embraced.



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Leadership change in virtually any organization is further complicated by the challenge of having to confront the personal style, motivation, behavioral traits, and idiosyncrasies of a key individual. These factors are inherently subjective, intensely personal, and are very often what defines an individual as a successful leader. Interestingly, leadership recently has been defined as the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. Recent definitions have also explored terms such as “collaborative leadership,” “servant leadership,” and “shared leadership,” among others. In actual practice, however, leadership often follows a strong executive model in which the individual’s strengths are the primary determinants of success or failure for the organization. Boards often retain expert search consultants to identify and recruit top talent to lead organizations because they understand how critical the chief executive is to the organization. The very qualities that are valued in successful leaders—dynamic personal style, high self-motivation, assertiveness, confidence, and charisma—may also make those who possess them reluctant to turn their full attention to considering the question of who can and will succeed them. Such leaders are often unable or unwilling to address such questions until they are approaching retirement, if then. For many, grappling with these questions is self-deflating and distracting from the intense work they must routinely undertake to be successful.

Consider the paradox: It is very common in arts organizations and other types of not-for-profit organizations for a charismatic, visionary, talented, and motivated leader to drive the successful efforts of the entire group. It is also common for these individuals to use their talents to create new organizations. Over time, these exceptional individuals become the established leadership and are in turn reluctant to cede control of the organization to someone else.

Moreover, boards and other leaders within the organization are also reluctant to hand the reins of control over to another because of the inherent, although temporary, instability that leadership transition creates.

Typically, the only people who are eager for new leadership are young individuals who share many of the same qualities as the successful leader. Seeing few or no available options for professional growth, these young people often leave to start their own organizations, re-creating a cyclical process that can result in exciting new endeavors but that also can be dangerously debilitating to the field, in that lessons learned are not passed along, and successive generations are unable to benefit from the experiences of more seasoned leaders. Additionally, much time and energy is wasted re-creating previously established practices and patterns.

Not surprisingly, most organizations have done little to develop and facilitate a succession process for either their leaders or senior staff. The instances of succession planning that do occur typically happen as a result of the strong recommendation of an external consultant or funder. Similarly, boards do only slightly better in initiating succession planning and arrive at it primarily through necessity or as an outgrowth of various training and development opportunities that emphasize the need for planning ahead. Much of this training—offered by the United Way and others—results from calls for greater diversity, which lead to the creation of programs that examine board and leadership structure and determine what is needed to increase opportunities for women and people of color to serve organizations effectively.

In contrast, corporations and businesses have become much better at developing and implementing succession plans. In many cases, senior leaders in corporations have been forced

by shareholder pressure and other factors to develop a process for identifying, developing, and positioning succession to key individuals. Often, corporations maintain dedicated staff whose objective is to manage such processes. Similarly, most corporations have adopted a mandatory retirement age to facilitate the transition of chief executives who may otherwise find it difficult to remove themselves from decision making. Such a system is not perfect and obviously does not take into account the ability of exceptional older executives who may remain fully capable of executing their responsibilities, but it does reflect recognition of the need to embrace and manage change.

Certainly, some arts organizations and other not-for-profit organizations have begun to recognize the importance of grappling with issues of change, in general, and leadership succession, in particular. Widespread development of processes to address issues of leadership change, internal talent development, and diversity, however, has not yet found acceptance. Such issues must be addressed.


#### **AFRICAN AMERICANS AS A FOCUS**

The challenges regarding leadership succession outlined above take on added significance when viewed through the lens of the African American experience. Much has been written about the impact of African Americans on American artistic endeavors. Some argue that African Americans as artists are definitional to American art in virtually all its forms. Clearly, the role of individual African American artists and of the African American community in general has been acknowledged and understood as important, and efforts have been made to facilitate the ongoing participation of black Americans in the arts. The importance of African American involvement as leaders in the management and oversight of arts organizations has

not been explored fully or embraced as critical to the continuing growth and vitality of arts organizations across the country.

As stated earlier, the oft-discussed demographic changes currently underway are forcing a reexamination of how and why we conduct business and recreation in the United States. The business sector has necessarily led the way in this reexamination because of its desire to identify and market products and services to consumers regardless of who they are and what they look like. Not all corporations have accepted this new reality, nor have all individuals involved in business. One would be hard-pressed, however, to find business leaders who did not outwardly embrace the necessity for greater diversity in their company and in their markets. Research from business schools, academics, consultants, and human resource professionals abounds with the business case for diversity—the notion that increasing diversity both internally and externally is a core, best practice from a bottom-line perspective. This recognition continues to grow and, for many businesses, is expanding to include a global perspective.

Arts organizations and other not-for-profit organizations generally have been slower to recognize and value the need for greater inclusion of African Americans as both internal leaders and external markets. Oddly, many arts organizations have sought to present or otherwise involve black artists for aesthetic and ethical/moral reasons (i.e., it is the right thing to do, and it makes good artistic sense). A deeper embrace of African Americans in the role of organizational leaders, however, has not occurred. This “Oprah syndrome,” in which one or a few superstars are held up as proof of the end of discrimination when in fact they are exceptions, serves only to obfuscate an alarming state of affairs.



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Little empirical data on the presence of African Americans in the arts leadership ranks have been collected. However, there are data from regional surveys, such as the one commissioned by the Illinois Arts Alliance Foundation, that show that fewer than 9% of arts organizations had African American executive directors. And a cursory glance at any national or regional gathering of arts groups, whether state arts councils or presenting organizations, suggests that the leadership remains disproportionately white and, in some instances, male.

Despite this admittedly bleak picture, it is African Americans, along with women, who have made the greatest gains in recent years in attaining significant leadership positions in the arts. For this reason, the experiences of African Americans provide important lessons about the type of barriers that prevent their experience, skills, intelligence, creativity, and energy from benefiting arts organizations.

#### **BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT**

Efforts to identify ways to increase young African Americans' involvement as leaders of arts organizations must recognize the barriers to change that exist. Most are not unique to African Americans or to arts organizations. Several are part of the overall organizational development process and should be understood as such. Historically, overt discrimination severely limited the involvement of African Americans in mainstream arts organizations. The generation of leadership serving 30 to 40 years ago worked primarily within the African American community and developed an important infrastructure of black institutions across the country. Today, mainstream organizations suffer for their past inability to tap this talent pool and create opportunities for successive generations of African American leaders. Note also that this situation exists in

a cultural context that questions whether African Americans should focus on building their own arts institutions and avoid spending time and energy attempting to participate in organizations that do not want them as full partners.

The consequences of the overall lack of succession planning in arts organizations are exacerbated when discussing African Americans because of the dearth of individuals in the pipeline. For those arts organizations that attempt to develop succession plans, the small number of African Americans positioned for promotion makes the effort to diversify leadership ranks very difficult.

Similarly, the challenge associated with the paradoxical situation of a strong executive needing to plan his or her own exit is heightened by the relatively small number of African Americans currently leading mainstream arts organizations. "Founder's syndrome," the "executive as superstar," and related issues make raising the topic of succession difficult. When forced to consider who should lead the organization after them, many leaders simply seek to replicate themselves. This replication also tends to be self-perpetuating when the organization has been successful. Thus, it is unlikely that individuals who may already be reluctant to replace themselves will do so with someone who does not fit their own mold. And the lack of existing African American leadership presents few opportunities for emerging leaders of color to replace others who look like them. Not surprisingly, young and emerging African American potential leaders are estranged from mainstream arts organizations in many ways.

The perception of arts organizations as offering low status and low pay is another significant barrier to greater involvement of young African Americans. Most organizations are

unable to match the salaries offered by comparable institutions in the private sector or the prestige that often accompanies positions in government or public service. This combination of perceived low status and low pay makes entry-level positions at arts organizations in particular unattractive. Many arts organizations are very desirable employers, of course, and positions with them carry much stature, but such opportunities are still untenable for people with limited sources of income, who cannot afford to work for less than what they could make elsewhere.


Arguably, careers in arts organizations should be driven by a love and desire to be part of the arts community, and by substantive interest in the content of the organizations. The reality is that, aside from a select few, most of the talented individuals an organization will justifiably want to attract expect to be compensated adequately, which is defined by the broader economic landscape available to an individual. For talented emerging leaders, this landscape has created expectations beyond those of most organizations. With an increasingly broad array of options available, young African Americans do not typically see arts organizations as a viable option.

Two final and important barriers to the increased involvement of African Americans are the schism that exists between generations, and subtle discrimination. These barriers are discussed together here because the generational gap occurs within all racial groups, and subtle discrimination happens both to African Americans and to young people. Therefore, young African Americans are prevented from greater involvement in decision-making opportunities due to their age and their race—in both mainstream and African American organizations. As a result, much like generations before them, these talented individuals seek to create their own organizations and institutions and are

forced to re-create the efforts, complete with mistakes, of the past. Moreover, established organizations lose their relevance, edge, creativity, and appeal because of the lack of new and different leadership.

One need look no further than the recent success of the touring museum exhibition focused on hip-hop culture, *Roots, Rhymes, and Rage*, to understand the potential of new and different leadership to energize existing institutions. The success of this groundbreaking exhibition, conceived and produced by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, is evident in the quality of the exhibition itself, the size of the audiences that attended, and the composition of those audiences. Rarely do museums draw such young crowds, and rarely do museums draw young people of color in such large crowds. These young people, along with their white counterparts, are the arts audience of the very near future, and understanding their needs and interests is critical to a thriving artistic and cultural landscape.

Despite other research and observations concerning the graying of arts audiences, the sometimes-moribund programming of presenting organizations, and the inherently risk-averse nature of current leadership, few serious, concentrated efforts have been made to create real opportunities for young African Americans. Current leadership questions their ability and/or qualifications because of their age and their race. Current leadership also expresses concerns about the impact on funding and participation that greater and more visible involvement by African Americans would have. Each of these concerns reflects subtle racism and is far more indicative of the fears of the current leadership than of any actual deleterious impact of change. The continuing lack of opportunities for African Americans of varying generations reflects only a change from overt to covert discrimination. Ironically, the feared negative impact of



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African American leadership has had very little opportunity for actual examination while the negative impact of a real lack of new leadership is felt daily and has placed a wide array of arts organizations in financial and creative peril.

#### **SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE**

There are a number of direct actions that can be taken to create expanded opportunities for emerging leaders. The following list ranges from the fairly mundane to more involved, long-term strategies. Other examples can easily be found in the business and not-for-profit literature, as well on the Web sites of several youth organizations. These suggestions are neither exclusive nor exhaustive and are meant to stimulate creativity and risk taking by existing leadership.

- *Create executive apprenticeship opportunities within your organization for existing staff and for other organizations' existing staff.*
- *Create partnerships with African American organizations for staff exchanges.*
- *Aggressively recruit young African Americans from both colleges and arts management programs, as well as from the local artist community.*
- *Diversify your board of directors by supplementing the current group with young African Americans.*
- *Select guest presenters from among local artists unaffiliated with a major institution, students and faculty of predominately black colleges, or local DJs and hip-hop artists.*
- *Develop and enforce term limits and mandatory sabbaticals for existing leaders, and use young African Americans as "acting" staff when possible.*
- *Embrace failure, fully explore unsuccessful efforts in this area, share the lessons widely, and develop other approaches to the problem.*

As arts organization leadership confronts the issue of diversifying their leadership ranks, they must also consider the following questions:

- *Can your organization remain artistically and financially viable without the involvement of new, different, and younger leaders?*
- *What unspoken beliefs keep your organization from creating more opportunities for young people who don't look like the current leadership?*
- *What price are you currently paying for not involving young African American leaders?*
- *How much are you willing to pay to not diversify your leadership ranks?*

**The answers to these and other related questions are also part of the answer to the question of how arts organizations in the United States will remain relevant, viable, and provocative in a rapidly evolving, increasingly diverse society.**