

***Listening to the Next Generation:
Finding New Ways to Lead the Arts and Culture Field***
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(A keynote address for the participants of *Facing Pages* an annual conference for LitTAP, a program of Just Buffalo and the New York State Council on the Arts presented on October 19, 2007 at Minnowbrook Conference Center, New York.)

I was asked to talk with you tonight about the impending change in nonprofit leadership and the influx of younger people to the field. I imagine that we've all seen the articles in the *New York Times* and the like about the next generation and how it's different from the current generation and how this is changing the workplace. Generation Y wants flexibility and Boomers want loyalty, Millennials live by text messaging and Boomers are still writing memos etc. This can make for interesting discussion, but this issue of the changing leadership landscape is so much more than that. So rather repeat what's in those articles, I want to talk about some related issues that I don't see as much about, particularly around how we respond to the changes we see coming or are already experiencing, as well as some things that I think we should consider taking the initiative to change.

To give you a little more about my background, I've always been interested in organizational development and capacity building. The questions I'm always asking are related to how we create stronger more adept organizations despite our general undercapitalization. Lately I've become increasingly interested in how we address capacity building from a human resources standpoint. After seven bureaucratic years with the arts commission in San Diego and 8 years or so previous to that in small under-resourced nonprofits and the last 2-1/2 years as a consultant to these and others, I've had the opportunity to observe and study this topic from a variety of angles. Unfortunately, what I don't hear a lot of discussion about is how we address the care and feeding of our most valuable resource – our human resources. I'd like to share some of my thoughts and observations about this with you tonight in the context of a larger theme about leadership and the changing non profit workplace.

I've done several workshops about addressing change and I've always coached people with the understanding that you can't stop change but you can determine how you want to respond to it – are you able to be proactive or are you only able to react?

Sometimes you can't choose. You suddenly find yourself in a situation you didn't anticipate. At other times you are able to plan and I think you find that you often can plan for more unknown changes that you realize. Although I must also say that I used to think you could even work ahead in anticipation of the unknown more than I do now. As I've matured I've come to accept the spontaneity of life and appreciate its more organic qualities.

Succession planning is one of the capacity building areas we can often work ahead on– you may not know when you'll have to use the plan, but it doesn't mean you can't be prepared by creating one now. I recall a colleague talking about a study they were doing with New York museums around succession planning and one of the respondents said that their institution didn't have a succession plan, but the unexpected loss of a director might fall under their disaster plan.

Other organizational development changes that are more in your control might be changing your mission or the course of your organization's programs in an effort to better address your constituent needs, or your service to the community. Change can be considered good or bad depending on how it's interpreted.

There has never been a time without change. Today, the changes we're experiencing can feel overwhelming because they have the potential to transform how we do business as nonprofit cultural agents. A recent series of articles in a newsletter from AMS Consulting provided a few examples:

1. the changing definition of arts and culture
2. concern about the viability of our current delivery system – a sit and listen past with a cultural participation future
3. the blurring of the for profit and non profit sectors
4. changing consumer tastes
5. shifting populations

They had eight in all, but what struck me about these in particular was that each one of them connects to work I've been doing with the role of our changing multi-generational society in arts and culture leadership. I also notice is that none of them really address human resources or leadership and yet, these are critical areas in which we should be learning about and understanding change.

Let's look at the few items that I've listed and how the next generation is a contributing factor to change:

The definition of arts and culture is changing with the younger generations, the roles of technology and mass consumer markets. This is happening at the same time that people seek a greater personal connection to the creative process and in particular to their own creativity.

Technology is making access to new means of artistic creation, production, presentation and distribution. Almost anyone can create their own music, DVDs, videos, digital photographs, and use desktop publishing. These means are being used extensively by young people – many of whom have had little traditional arts education in the schools; but want to find creative outlets anyway. I'll also say that they aren't exclusively for the young. My mother loves her new digital camera and printer – it is to her the modern day equivalent of her father's basement photograph developing equipment – she can do it herself – at 82 years of age. She's found an outlet for creativity in the new technology and is doing something easily that for the most part, used to require greater skills and equipment. We can argue about artists vs. hobbyists of course. But more people want greater connection to a creative process, and technology is making that happen in a variety of ways.

With the increase in mass produced or large scale traveling exhibitions and performance such as Cirque de Soleil or the Body exhibit, there is an increase in the presentation of for-profit arts and culture activities that are patronized by a more popular and mainstream culture. The public in general and today's young people in particular don't pay as much attention to the difference between for-profit and non-profit models for creating art that many of us do who are from an

earlier generation. And as young people mature into the professional arts arena and our relationship to art and creativity changes, these lines will blur even further. This is part of the growing creative economy that Richard Florida addresses in *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

As for changing consumer tastes... this isn't just about young people, for as the Boomers retire and spend more time with family, they are taking advantage of staying home with their DVDs and big screen TVs. For young people it might be DJs and night clubs that seem preferable to symphonies and ballets – we know that they prefer to wait until the last minute to buy tickets if they are going, so counting on them for season tickets will be more difficult than our current/previous generations.

To sum this up, it's important to acknowledge that it isn't just the next generation that is moving the field in a different direction, but rather it's a combination of different generational needs, an increasingly multicultural society, the information age, the service economy and we can even blame Sarbanes Oxley. But regardless of the reason, the 21st century will be filled with opportunities to redefine our model, our craft and our relationships. So, what does it mean?

For many of us, change is scary. We tend to have a collective fear of the unknown and many of these shifts are sending us into unknown territory. Unknown successors, unknown models, unknown and emerging art forms ... unknown challenges ahead.

Since this address is to be about the coming national transitions in leadership, I'd like to look at what isn't on the list. In particular I'd like to look at what the influx of younger people means to our workplace and how it can begin to help us think differently about our approach to human resources and how we may be even be able to become instigators or leaders of change to the way we view our human capital in the nonprofit arts and culture sector. Will the national transition be driving us or will we be the ones in the drivers seat?

One thing those of us who study these questions know about the younger generation is that they want greater flexibility in their schedules and autonomy over their lives. They are more apt to be

the ones on staff asking for better work life balance. They have experienced their Boomer parent's workaholic ways and they are not impressed.

They are indicating in greater numbers than previous generations that they want to raise families and in some cases have one parent be a stay at home parent. If you look around at our field, you'll find many of us in our forties and older have forgone children because our work is our family.

What happens as a result is that the younger generation wants more time or more flexible time and we who supervise them assume they aren't dedicated, committed, loyal or crazy like the rest of us.

Which leads me to my first point about a new approach to human resources – like all of us, young people want to be treated like people, not like things. If you think about it, our current work model has been developed to encourage overtime, underpay, few benefits and more work. We are part of the machine and the machine has become very depersonalized.

The machine does not acknowledge that family, a spiritual life, a stronger relationship with our creative selves or time to breathe are important. It asks us to fit those things in and around our 8am to 10pm schedules and night and weekend performances. Many of us in Gen X and earlier accept this as the norm. And I'd suggest that we encourage it simply by not discouraging it or trying to do differently. Maybe its time to let the next generation push the envelope and hold up a mirror to the rest of us.

I challenge us therefore to consider that the next generation really may be right in their request to have balanced lives and to be treated like people. How can we change our workplaces so that we don't just accommodate them, but we take their lead on this? I think in our deepest conscious we want this too. Rather than begrudge them some flex time, why don't we join them and find ways to use flex time as well? Doing this could take some serious organizational soul searching, reprioritizing and redistribution of responsibilities – but I believe that the end result will be a

more humane approach to human resource management, stronger working relationships and organizations.

This leads me to my second point – we must change how we view our staff and professional development. I’ve been a participant and observer of the Americans for the Arts Emerging Leaders program. They are working to create a critical mass of younger, next generation art leaders and cultural managers through localized programs developed primarily through local arts agencies. About a year ago someone circulated an email on the Emerging Leaders listserv that asked whose programs had budgets. I can’t recall one person from a program who could indicate that their parent organization, mostly arts councils or local arts agencies had dedicated any funding for the implementation of an Emerging Leaders program for their community – all of these programs were taking place because people were creating them on a shoe string. All the meetings are brown bag or no-host, speakers are asked to donate their time and agency staff people in charge of the program have to fit it this work around their other work.

We are talking here about creating programs that will strengthen the leadership and professional skills of our next generation and the parent agencies have all said “we support you but not enough to fund a small budget for it or to make it a priority.” My own experience too with many of the seasoned staff in organizations for which the emerging leaders in my community worked couldn’t seem to part with their younger staff person for 90 minutes once a month for a planning meeting. One senior staff person of a major institution would not let her staff out because there was too much work to do. I was appalled. What she was really saying to me was that she didn’t want her younger staff to have a professional life or network outside of the one that she the senior staff person approved and that professional growth was not encouraged.

Now I understand that all of our budgets are strapped and our tasks outweigh our overly burdened schedules, but what does it say when any of us must justify participation at conferences or workshops or other means of professional development based on the return on the expense, or time away from the office and what it brings directly back to the agency today rather than how its strengthening the field for tomorrow or next year?

How many know where we put human resources on the financial statement? They show up on our balance sheet as a “payroll liability.” Think about it. Paying for staff and paying for professional development is viewed only as an expense rather than an investment. We need to change our mindsets so that we begin to think of our staff, our *people* as unrestricted assets, not payroll liabilities.

I challenge us all to consider the ways in which we can view time away for networking, the costs associated with participation in professional education opportunities or even flex time for staff as an asset to the organization, rather than a liability.

I also encourage those who are in the position of grantmaking to consider this as a priority as well. We know funding policies can drive cultural policy, so let’s let it drive organizational policy and the strengthening of our people as well.

Many talk about the changing nonprofit model. There is a notion that the model is broken or deficient. Often times we talk about fixing it through greater diversification of our income streams to reflect more earned income in relation to contributed, some like Irvine Foundation have talked about the possibility that there are too many nonprofit arts organizations doing the same things in communities and that we could be in store for more mergers or elimination of duplicative organizations while others talk about too much product and not enough demand. I agree with all of these concerns about our use and acquisition of resources, but I would challenge us to go deeper and closer to home. One of the biggest problems with our nonprofit model is that we’ve done very little to address personnel management or our human resources. Our greatest asset is our people, our artists, our creatives, our managers and staff and yet we do so little to grow them as we do to grow our programs and services. We are in the business of championing human expression and yet we reserve our support for those we serve - artists and audiences - and have failed to include ourselves in the picture.

Rather letting the next generation change this later, we must all start working together now to find ways to address it while we’re still at work. Because it isn’t just about engaging young leaders, it’s about keeping mid career artists and managers continually engaged over a 40-plus

year career. Forty years is a long time to be part of a machine like the one we've created, especially when we have all the creative ability to adapt the machine, if we really wanted to take the lead.

I recently conducted a survey as part of an upcoming article I'm writing about mid career arts and culture managers. What I found were people who are working long hours and feeling burnout for all the reasons I've described. Yet, they didn't indicate that they were ready to leave the arts field anytime soon. When I asked them in a follow up email to tell me what keeps them motivated to work under these conditions, they talked about all the intrinsic and intangible ways that working in the arts and culture profession gives them something in return. I was moved by their inspiring words that indicated a deep philosophical and one might even say spiritual connection to their work as well as the feeling that they were making a difference in the world. While I agree with them wholeheartedly and found such connectivity to their commitment in my own career, I wondered why we can't have both intrinsic rewards and a more humane work place with tangible benefits that befit a field dedicated to the betterment of the world through an expanding and ever deepening human creative potential.

We all want to feel like we matter and we all want to be treated like people rather than things. Which brings me to my final point. We need to change how we view leadership.

I am amazed that it's become so easy to relegate this kind of "discussion" to articles and studies rather than together in communities, organizations and amongst colleagues who can do things differently if they choose. This should not be an intellectual exercise or a discussion left for others to have.

Leadership is not out there and it doesn't reside in a few or only in the "seasoned, elder or established ones". The responsibility to work for stronger better more humane organizations lies in each and every one of us. Younger generations can provide older generations with a both mirror and new creative energy while older generations can reach out to younger generations and share their experience and mentoring abilities. I'm not saying it's going to be easy. There will be a lot of push and a lot of pull. But everyone has so much to gain in the long run.

As you participate in the weekend's sessions about leadership succession, creating new organizations, encouraging rich and rewarding transitions, as you take time for renewal and reflect on your work as artists or in arts and culture management, I want to encourage you and even challenge you to identify one or two ways you can do things differently in your own workplaces and daily lives. Maybe its mentoring a younger staff person, inviting your board to talk about more personal personnel management, connecting with others in your community and networking more for balance than professional gain, inspiring a colleague or even yourself to grow in creativity or finding a way to encourage a more flexible work schedule. The risk of change will certainly reward you with new perspective if nothing else. But I imagine there will be more reward than that.

Leadership is about taking on the challenges required to move the community in healthier and more successful directions. It is also about inspiring others to greater roles of leadership as well. For years, one of my mantras has been "It's all just us." It is a more simplified and hopefully more positive interpretation of Pogo's "I have seen the enemy and it is I". There isn't someone out there who is going to make it better or to wave a magic wand. We each need to take up the challenge to begin to see things in a different light and hold the light up for others to see more clearly themselves. When we each work for greatness and inspire others to seek it as well, we as a cultural community and as a professional field will become stronger and richer as well.

I invite you to take the first steps towards greater cultural leadership this weekend and continue the journey when you return home.

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