

The Choice to Lead

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Reported by Cecilia Green

Moderator: Jennifer Armstrong, Executive Director, 40 North/88 West

Panelists:

Karen Carolin, Education Coordinator, Chicago Dept. of Cultural Affairs

Megan Holland, General Manager, CU Symphony

Stephanie Pereira, Research Assoc., SCALE Program Manager, Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education

Adam Thurman, President, Mission Paradox

Terry Scrogum, Executive Director, Illinois Arts Council

While being in a leadership position is rewarding, the panelists agreed that it is hard work and has some drawbacks. Among the challenges they face are:

- Being charged with leadership in a situation where it's not your job
- Being given responsibility without authority and resources to do the job well
- Juggling the different sets of wants, needs and ideas of staff and various board members
- Not always being valued as you'd like to be; receiving more criticism than praise

Yet they also agree that being a leader of an arts organization is important work and you often are the one constant as other staff and board members leave or cycle off.

General tips offered by panelists included:

- If you find yourself in a position you are uncomfortable with, prepare by gathering knowledge.
- In the not-for-profit world, you cannot be a specialist. Develop fluency in several areas.
- Go to conferences like "One State: Together in the Arts" to build a network. Call someone to ask for help. We tend to find our best resources with people who have "been there, done that."

Making the hard decision

A leader is one who has to stand up and deal with the difficult situations. Being a leader does not mean you must gain consensus in all situations. Decisions by committee are not always best ones.

The panelists gave the following suggestions for handling a difficult decision that is likely to be unpopular:

- Review why you made that decision because you will need to explain it in several forums.
- Review the ramifications: what are the negatives and how to mitigate them.
- Vet your own arguments with yourself or others to look for weaknesses. Address the weaknesses before others can bring them up.
- Find allies and ask them to back you up.
- How to respond to critics is sometimes a function of who they are, such as a board member versus a person who buys a single ticket to an event.

Building credibility

It takes time to earn respect, even if you have the title. In the first few months on the job, you can gain trust by:

- Getting a sense of the background of those you work with and learning what triggers them, not to manipulate them, but to learn what they respond to best.
- Listen more and talk less.
- Take on menial tasks -- things no one else wants to do -- and "do them with gusto."
- Follow through so people will know you can take on more.

- Express yourself in board meetings, but be careful not to over-participate by talking louder and longer than others. Don't get so caught up in "your idea" that you get out of sync with the mission.

Being supportive

A leader realizes that there are other voices that should be listened to and helped in developing their leadership potential. A leader delegates responsibilities in a supportive way. Like a driver's education instructor, give the wheel to someone else but stay in the seat beside them to help if they start to go off the road.

At the same time, give a realistic picture to staff and interns of what it takes to work in the arts – everything from stuffing envelopes through writing grants.

And, if you like your job, please say so. Tell the good stories and put energy out in the workplace. Avoid discouraging potential leaders by the way we talk about the field and our jobs.

Sticking it out

It's helpful for an arts leader to have people from outside the industry who can be candid sounding boards. It doesn't necessarily follow that "if we build it, they will come." Turn to other professionals in the HR, legal, accounting and other professions for counsel. "If you don't have knowledge, get it, buy it, rent it."

Avoid crossing over the line with the board members. Determine what can and cannot be shared. Opinions are for voting members only and if asked to express yourself on an issue, point out the pros and cons and whether this direction is on track with fulfilling the mission. Your job is to carry out the board's decision.

Be alert to ethics and rules of conflict of interest, and realize that standards we are being held to are more stringent today than in the past.

You cannot always protect your staff from an ineffective or negative board member, but you should alert them to the "passions" of these individuals. A "disruptive" board member is often a misinformed person who does not understand what his or her role as a board member is. It is our responsibility to educate them.

Intergenerational communications

Be conscious of possible generational differences. The founders who still have a "beautiful passion" for the organization may have a more hierarchal, rather than a participatory, management style. You could be caught between them and younger emerging leaders who want a more immediate outcome. If we say, "wait, be patient for a year," younger individuals won't believe you're taking them seriously. Instead specify a clear parameter that will signal pursuing their ideas. Coach them on the processes; why it takes a month to get agreement on this.

At the same time, make sure to make new roles for retired people and that others respect the elders who carry the organization's DNA with them. One organization mentioned had co-executive directors, one 20 years younger than the other.

Younger leaders who are experienced business leaders expect the same tools as a for-profit organization, such as a strategic plan and a board manual, which founders may not believe are necessary. Carefully bring the members with major investments in the organization along by using language they relate to and by not talking down to them.

To move from "the way things have always been done" to a more effective organization, study your organization. Does self-preservation motivate more than self-actualization? In some cases, you'll have to prove the current system is broken. Nonprofits don't think they can die, so you have to point out that if they continue down this road, yours could cease to exist. Show the "fix" in little

snapshots to sell the ideas. Use benchmarks with competing organization; show how you stack up with them.

This enlightening session ended with the quote:

The brave are simply those with the clearest vision of what is before them: glory and danger alike and notwithstanding, go out and meet it.

--Leopold in 2001 movie, "Kate and Leopold"