

Preparing for Leadership in Non-Profit Theaters

American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and the Wellesley Centers for Women collaborated on documenting the career paths of leaders in large non-profit theaters in the U.S. to identify the skills needed for successful leadership. The recommendations presented in this pamphlet are a snapshot of the results of their research.

In the larger non-profit U.S. regional theaters, artistic leaders have carved their paths through various entry points. Most were directors, but many were producers, and some have climbed to top artistic leadership through other fields, like dramaturgy.

Regardless of their career path, artistic leaders' job descriptions include artistic planning, community development, and fiscal cooperation with the executive director and the Board of Trustees to support fundraising. This document contains suggestions on how to attain some of those important skills in order to prepare for a leadership position.

Shaping a Better World through Research & Action
Wellesley Centers for Women

A.C.T. AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Tips for Aspiring Artistic Leaders

You aspire to be the artistic leader of a large non-profit theater in the United States. Our research shows that being appointed to lead a theater depends on the selection committee's willingness/ability to recognize and trust your qualifications. Here are research-based tips for early- and mid-career professionals to become strong candidates.

Building your directing portfolio:

- Insist on directing plays outside of your cultural background. Avoid being “pigeon-holed.” Often, directors of color report that they are only asked to direct work by playwrights of color. Women are called to direct plays written by women. Having a limited portfolio can be a significant barrier toward career progression. Read widely, and learn what appeals to you as an artist.

In addition to taking on any opportunity that pays, create your own smaller productions that are of a wider selection, more experimental, or closer to your interests. With permission, watch those you can learn from closely but quietly during their rehearsals (this is their show), and keep good notes. Ask to be their assistant if you can.

- While you are freelancing, build experience by directing plays widely, in many different theaters. To do this, cultivate positive relationships with a wide variety of theater professionals, including theater critics, to become one of the few directors who comes to mind when a season is being planned. This is a lifelong process, but every exposure counts.

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Working with mentors/sponsors:

- Mentors can help you grow and develop through their close relationship with you; sponsors are people with power in the field who are willing to champion you. Sometimes they are the same person. You need both.
- Seek out mentors who have faced the same challenges you are facing. If those are not available, find mentors who “get you” and can support you in your specific situation.
- Search for a mentor and/or sponsor once you are ready to improve/challenge yourself. You can offer your own expertise and skillset to balance the relationship.
- Ask mentors/sponsors to speak to your strengths in public.

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Building your directing portfolio:

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- Learn and practice to clearly articulate and defend your programmatic choices. If something fails, understand why and own that failure so you can translate it into future success. A negative review may not mean a fully failed production; patrons have their own opinions and may surprise you. Be open to their input and suggestions.
- Produce shows in addition to directing them. Producing exposes you to many skills that are necessary to reach the top and lets you understand planning and budgeting. Start small, but do it all: budget, raise money, create connections, rent a space, get rights to a play, create contracts, and so on. During your student years, get involved at every level of your school's theater or find a small theater to get deeply involved with at every level of responsibility and in every department. Start your own production mainly to forge contacts with playwrights and other passionate players in the field. Even if you didn't make any money, the show could still be a success for your career.

Working with mentors/sponsors:

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- Search for mentors willing to see you through a project from start to finish. Find opportunities where you can safely fail and learn by doing rather than shadowing. Enlist mentors to publicly give you credit for your successes.
- Initiate targeted conversations around leadership aspiration within your own cohort and with those who can support your growth. Do not wait for others to initiate this conversation for you.
- Cultivate and maintain relationships throughout the field with peers and with people in diverse positions in different organizations. Familiarity leads to trust, and trust can help you become the leader search committees will select.
- Speak about work-life balance issues with mentors, peers, and allies, and participate in a theater-wide conversation around this topic. Erasing the taboo on mentioning family care or life outside work will help level the playing field to leadership by removing barriers for those who care for others.

Tips for early career development:

- If you are employed at a theater, seek clear and specific articulation of work expectations from your manager or supervisor. Insist on regular performance reviews that align your accomplishments to the theater's goals. Put in writing what your ambitions and your plan for growth are. Often supervisors can support you in attaining them. If reviews are not part of the culture of your place of work, keep notes for yourself on your successes and failures and how you can grow from those.
- Understanding each department's role, priorities, and responsibilities develops a wider and deeper set of leadership skills. Work — or volunteer if you can — at a smaller theater where cross-departmental expertise may be easier to gain.
- Understand the structure of theater companies, how they operate, and why a company chose the model it adopted.
- Understand budgeting: What resources does it take to produce a play?
- Understand development: Understand what sources of monetary support (ticket sales, donations, foundation support, etc.) are in place. Find which programs within the theater earn your passion (play development, education, etc.) and understand how you would fund them. Understand who gives money, and why.

This research was initiated by Carey Perloff, artistic director, and Ellen Richard, former executive director, of the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

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Tips for later career development:

- Understand and participate fully in fundraising/ development. It is a critical skill, can be learned on the job, and is the number one reason why women believe they don't succeed in reaching the top. It is made up of the following skills:
 - Learn to effectively articulate the theater's mission. Reading past grant proposals can help. Understand and learn to articulate why you want to represent the theater.
 - Gain a strong command of public speaking and community outreach. Talk with experienced development professionals about how they built their skills and which tools they used to learn them. Learn to speak with a variety of audiences. Learn to articulate the necessity of the particular theater. Learn to work with the press.
 - Work on building deep, personal bonds with potential donors. Fundraising = Friend-raising. Find common interests, and truly listen to develop a deep relationship. Learn to articulate the mission such that the donor would feel included in the theater's mission and would want to get and stay involved.
 - Understand who gets involved in fundraising (AD, ED, Board members, Development office) and in which way.
 - Understand how the fundraising budget is projected, if it is met, and what happens if it isn't.
- Build on any experience you may have gained through founding a theater. Those skills are very marketable as wide, cross-departmental expertise. Founding a theater is also a great alternative path into leadership if the type of theater you hope to lead is non-existent. If the theater you founded did not survive, apply the skills you have acquired in a larger-budget theater. Understand that scaling up is critical to your success. Focus on understanding why the theaters you work at chose their organizational structures and what their budgets are, especially when scaling up.
- At a larger organization where departments can be more siloed, seek approval to sit in on meetings of different departments so you can get cross-departmental exposure.
- Seek out introduction to a Board's function and decision-making processes through approaching (with approval of your supervisor) a Board member; find opportunities to sit in on meetings at your own theater; or make Board connections at a theater you patronize. Become a Board member at a theater or other non-profit to learn about Board governance, internal dynamics, organizational culture, and a Board's fiduciary responsibilities. Understanding the relationship between the Board and the artistic and operational leaders of the theater is crucial to success.

The study on which these recommendations are based focused on the persistent gender and racial disparity among artistic and executive/managing directors of theaters, and on how this disparity can be addressed.

Women and especially people of color are underrepresented in the top leadership positions, even though women hold the majority of next-in-line positions throughout theaters. This represents the operation of a glass ceiling.

Men benefit from a strong, persistent male-leader stereotype during leadership searches. A deeper trust is placed in their potential, even if unproven. Founding experience has been rewarded in leadership appointments more frequently for men, although women have founded theaters in large numbers. This suggests that women do not get *selected* for top positions but have to found a theater to become its leader. On the other hand, our research showed that the only way women are favored in leadership selection is if they are already employed within the hiring theater. They are promoted into leadership at their own theaters at much higher rates than men in similar positions.

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While many women and people of color are very qualified for leadership, the search process is not always without bias. In addition to sharing this guide with aspiring leaders, we urge Board search committees to actively step up and support diversity when selecting a leader.

Tips for those seeking leadership opportunities:

- Don't wait to seek a leadership position until you feel one hundred percent prepared. Apply and present the skills and experiences you have that align with the position, and learn to articulate the supports you might need as a new leader and how those balance against your strengths. Even a first, unsuccessful interview is an opportunity to make new contacts.
- Reach out to and maintain relationships with search firm professionals so they know your ambition and potential. Attend conferences (TCG) where you can connect with industry leaders and professionals.
- Learn about leadership relationships between artistic and executive directors by attending high-level meetings, if possible, and observing interactions and relationship dynamics among senior staff and Board members.

Preparing a job application for leadership:

- Understand the context of the vacancy you are applying for: why did the leader depart the organization, and what kind of legacy did that person leave at the theater? What is the turnover rate; is there a history of diverse leaders; is the theater financially stable?
- Learn to articulate the theater's mission clearly. Learn as much as possible about the organization; speak with current and previous staff members.
- Learn to clearly articulate your own vision and mission as the artistic leader of a theater. Have a clear definition of your own aesthetic and how it fits with the theater's mission.
- Be prepared to translate the theater's mission into programming.
- Highlight your past experience in programming, and practice conversations in which your choices may be challenged.
- Place your strengths in the context of the mission of the theater and defend your potential. Clearly articulate that you understand how to scale up if necessary and which supports you have built around you to achieve that. Never underestimate your ability to learn on the job to make up for any lacking or leaner prior experience.
- Demonstrate deep understanding of the operations of both the artistic and administrative sides.
- Do practice interviews with people familiar with the process of theater leader selection.

For more information on the Women's Leadership in Resident Theaters project and other recommendations for theater professionals, visit wcwonline.org/theaterleadership or contact theaterstudy@wellesley.edu.