

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, executive leaders have carved their paths through various entry points. Most were general managers before taking a leadership position, followed by directors of marketing, production, finance, and development, and producers. A few others had founded the theater they are leading.

Regardless of their career path, executive leaders' job descriptions include 3 main areas: (1) working with the Board of Trustees; (2) working with the artistic leadership; (3) overseeing all business/operational departments. Each of those areas requires specific preparation and skill development. A deep understanding of each department's functioning is an important preparation. This document contains suggestions on how to attain some of those important skills.

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

A.C.T. AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Tips for Aspiring Executive Leaders

You aspire to be the operational 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.

Preparing for executive leadership:

- 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. At a larger organization where departments can be more siloed, seek approval to sit in on meetings of different departments.
- Board relations are considered the hardest skill to attain among operational leaders in larger theaters. 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.

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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.
- 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.

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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.

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Tips for Aspiring Executive Leaders

Preparing for executive leadership:

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- Understand and participate fully in fundraising/development. It is a critical skill, can be learned on the job, and should include the following:
 - Learn to effectively articulate the theater's mission. Reading successful 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 it. Learn to speak with a variety of audiences. Learn to articulate the necessity of the particular theater.
 - Work on building deep, personal bonds with potential donors. Fundraising = Friend-raising. Learn to articulate the mission such that the donor feels included in the theater's mission and wants to get involved.
 - Understand how the fundraising budget is projected, if it is met, and what happens if it isn't.
 - Build your own portfolio and keep records of how it grows. Add strong writing samples, budgets, and strategic plans.
- Participate in or observe strategic planning sessions at your own or another institution. Understand the plan of action and whether it led to success.
- Learn from those who oversee a larger budget and manage a larger staff. If you are being selected to manage a larger budget and staff than you are used to, seek informal or even professional coaching to understand scaling up.
- Gain a clear understanding of HR/organizational behavior and how an organization can protect itself and care for its employees.
- Seek clear and specific articulation of work expectations from your manager. 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.
- Expose yourself to the operations of the artistic side by producing shows or by sitting in on season planning and budgeting meetings to understand its process.

This research was initiated by Carey Perloff, artistic director, and Ellen Richard, former executive director, of the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. It was sponsored by a generous grant from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. Additional funding came from the Valentine Foundation, the Wellesley Centers for Women, and many individual donors. We are equally grateful for the in-kind support from TCG, SDC, LORT, and other theater organizations and many individuals who donated time and expertise to this work. For a full list of acknowledgements, please visit our website, wcwonline.org/theaterleadership

Seeking leadership opportunities:

- Don't wait to seek a leadership position until you feel one hundred percent prepared. Apply, 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.

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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 high-level 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.

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.
- 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 take care of others.
- 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.

Preparing a job application for leadership:

- Understand the context of the vacancy you applied 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 personal mission as a leader in non-profit theater.
- Highlight any past experience in producing and practice conversations in which your choices may be challenged. Understanding how to work with the artistic side is a key asset for aspiring operational leaders.
- Articulate 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 different departments in both the artistic and administrative sides of a theater.

Alternative paths to executive leadership in theaters may include:

- An entrepreneurial path that starts with creating your own organization
- Preparation through for-profit experience
- Preparation through specialization in one area, e.g., development, marketing, or finance, before branching out to learn about all the other departments that keep a theater running.