

Effective leadership in non-profit theaters

As a Board of Trustees member for a large theater company, your responsibility is much wider than to oversee the fiduciary health of the theater. One of your most profound responsibilities is the selection of the company's leadership.

Artistically, diversity can nurture our souls and our shared humanity. It enriches art by introducing more viewpoints and attracting a wider audience, simultaneously addressing the economics of the theater's survival. However, research shows that women and people of color are vastly underrepresented in theater leadership positions, even though women are present in large numbers in high-level positions throughout theaters.

The scarcity of women in leadership lends credence to the glass ceiling metaphor, where women can see the top but cannot get there.

This pamphlet provides tips to achieve greater equity in theater leadership.

These tips grew out of a study of leadership among members of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT). The study focused on the persistent gender and racial disparity among artistic and executive/managing directors of the theaters, and on how this disparity can be addressed.

We include here how you, as a board member, can make change toward equity in leadership.

Trustees driving excellence by leveraging diversity

For more information on the research behind these recommendations, visit

www.wcwonline.org/theaterleadership

Or contact

Sumru Erkut, serkut@wellesley.edu

Ineke Ceder, iceder@wellesley.edu

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For a full list of acknowledgements, please visit our website, www.wcwonline.org/theaterleadership

New-leader selection process tips:

1. Use vacancies in leadership as an opportunity for the theater to engage in *self-examination*: Where has the theater not met the diversity and inclusion goals of its mission?
This reflection will help articulate the *skills* and *experiences* to include in the *job description* for the next leader.
2. Help guide the development of *clear criteria* for a gender- and race-unbiased scoring template for hiring across the theater field. Start by articulating the expected level of competence of a leader. Have this template vetted by experts on diversity and inclusion in the industry.
3. Ensure *diverse* search committee membership that includes a variety of voices. Make sure each voice gets heard by instituting unanimous voting which enhances underrepresented groups' visibility and effective participation.
4. Conduct a *publicly* posted, *external search* for all major leadership positions, which will expose you to the widest slate of candidates.
5. Commit to interviewing applicants from *underrepresented* groups (consider the Rooney Rule). Only hire search firms with a record of placing diverse candidates in similar positions.
6. Ask the search firm to initially *disguise* the personal and demographic characteristics of leadership candidates, so as not to be influenced by characteristics irrelevant to doing the job.
7. Reconsider demanding exceptional *fundraising* skills from artistic director candidates. Instead, look for core skills:
 - skill and enthusiasm for speaking about the theater
 - relationship-building skills that can lead to deep, personal bonds with potential donors
 - willingness to support development efforts.Continue to support artistic director growth once on board.
8. Consider investing in professional *leadership mentors* for a new hire over the first year of the transition.
9. Provide support to the leadership team during the *transition* period to a new leader. This is particularly important for theaters that have shared/dual leadership.

Ongoing support of your theater's leaders:

1. Schedule regular *check-ins* of structured time to engage, mentor, support, and learn from your theater's leaders. Provide, for example,
 - support for artistic or cultural choices
 - professional coaching for managing a large team and budget.
2. Take action to streamline *conditions* of employment and salary *equity*.
3. Provide leaders and aspiring leaders with clear and specific goals, and tie performance *evaluations* to business accomplishments that are aligned with the theater's mission, including its diversity and inclusion mission.

Support for the internal theater community:

1. Recognize, confront, and correct instances of *gender and racial bias* within the board and among staff.
 - Anonymous surveys about experiences of bias among employees are a productive first step in identifying any potential friction.
 - Create an internal diversity committee, which includes board membership, to ensure the topic has a place in each conversation.
2. Make *work-life balance* a topic for open conversation at all employment levels (e.g., child care, excessive working hours). Develop a work-life balance framework that increases equity and equal opportunities for growth.
3. Ensure that aspiring leaders participate in fundraising and board relations so they can cultivate those important skills.
4. Create opportunities for *career development* at both early- and mid-career junctions. Develop and participate in mentorship programs specifically for high-potential women and people of color.
5. Invest in your theater's education programs to attract *young people* into careers in the theater.
6. Mentor a *variety* of aspiring leaders, from various genders, cultures, and races. Keeping diversity in mind, replicate what works.
7. Initiate and support conversations with state and federal government to increase *funding* for the arts and introduce a *jobs program* that includes paid work at theaters or other arts institutions.

Resources

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