

Leadership

The Key to the Future

by Management Consultants for the Arts

Are leaders born or made? It's an age-old question, but one that is exceedingly pertinent to today's cultural community. The answer, at the risk of sounding too clever, is yes: some leaders are born and some are made. We've all seen born leaders – those firebrands who spring fully formed onto the scene, inspiring the devotion of staff and patrons alike, whose every step is absolutely, magically right. We've also seen leaders who are made, often, self-made; they start out as ordinary mortals in love with their particular disciplines and develop into courageous, inspiring leaders by virtue of hard work and close attention to what they are doing. It is this latter group and those who aspire to it that we have in mind as we write this essay. We believe that, yes, leaders can be made; whether they come to work in shirt sleeves, three-piece suits or leotards, executives can become better and more effective at their jobs by consciously cultivating the qualities of outstanding leadership.

The skill of these leaders can, in turn, determine whether their organizations will do good work or great work, even live or die. In this light, the nurturance of leadership is no idle pursuit; it is essential. Need we review the stakes? Over the past few difficult years, survival has become a real concern for many of us. Threats to freedom of expression and financial pressures stemming from smaller donations and changing audiences at first seemed like a horrific, but aberrant, siege; with time, we have come to realize that these difficulties will not fade away, that for many of us, they will be a continuing way of life. The cultural institutions that survive will do so because their executives, in concert with their trustees and staffs, proceed with intelligence and vision.

But cultural organizations are so varied in size and purpose and their executives are called upon to perform so many functions that it might seem difficult to condense the qualities of an effective leader into a few short pages. What, after all, does the director of a small historic house museum have in common with the globetrotting general director of a major opera company? Or the iconoclastic founder of a modern dance company? Even within disciplines, some executives have large support staffs, while others don't. In some organizations, two people perform the functions of artistic director and managing director; in others, both functions are handled by a single person. Yet for all their differences, these leaders have much in common. At Management Consultants for the Arts, we have worked with cultural organizations of every size and purpose. And we have found that no matter what the venue, the best leaders share several qualities.

First and foremost is character. The best leaders we've known are people of strength, with integrity of purpose. They are devoted to their disciplines and believe in what they do.

Those who have read our publications are aware of our commitment to two guiding principles: dedication to mission and collective leadership.¹

An organization's mission is the reason for its existence, its essence. Whatever that mission is – and each one is unique – it should be the starting point for every step in the organization's progress, every decision made in its name. The best leaders understand this.

Collective leadership refers to the kind of relationship between board of trustees, executive and staff in which all parties are encouraged to facilitate each other's work.² Collective leadership differs from the more typical hierarchical arrangement that we know from corporate and military models. It's a balancing act. It requires mutual respect for the boundaries of each job and mutual support. Last year, we wrote about the characteristics of effective trustees. In this essay, we will focus on the qualities of effective professional executive leadership.

The most effective executives recognize that their charge is not only to carry out an organization's mission and not only to take part in collective leadership, but to shape that mission, and to create the environment in which collective leadership can flourish.

Character, dedication to mission and commitment to collective leadership are only the beginning. Here are some of the characteristics of the most effective leaders we have known.

1

The most effective leader is a visionary. Leaders bring a visionary quality to their work. They see their organizations in the context of both mission and marketplace. They evaluate the trends and figure out what it is that their organizations can offer to engage and compel their audiences. They see what the rest of the world misses.

We recall the case of a municipal performing arts center that had for decades presented a traditional repertoire. Attendance was off; the center's location was removed from the downtown hub of artistic activity and there was little to differentiate it from its more geographically accessible competitors. It could have faded into oblivion, but a new executive director had a vision. As he saw it, the center could create a niche for itself as a presenter of the most contemporary music and dance, much of it from abroad. Few other venues would touch this material; many in the arts world wondered how the public would respond. The director stuck to his vision and communicated his excitement to his staff, trustees and ultimately to the public. The center was transformed into a world-class presenter of contemporary programming, and it has done so well that it has been able to assist and collaborate with smaller groups that present similar material.

Some seventy-five miles up the highway, it's another story. A highly regarded summer theatre organization whose mission was to be a showplace for the work of an historic playwright lost its founder and key financial benefactor. Neither the company's new executive leadership nor its board of directors were able to imagine conducting the company's operations in a different manner and as audiences and finances changed, the theatre suffered a series of artistic, financial and operational disasters. Ultimately, without a new vision of itself, the company was forced to close.

2

The best leaders understand that good management is a must; they facilitate the alignment of the various operations within the organization so that everybody is working toward the same goals. An executive's creative vision is vital to a cultural organization, but vision won't make sure all the financial paperwork is in order or the brochure for the new season gets to the printer on time. The image of the MBA with calculator and management text at the ready has spilled over from the corporation to the non-profit arena. And it's true that the executive must often take on the role of administrator, whether in a hands-on capacity in a small organization or in a supervisory role in a larger one. Balance sheets, operating budget results, audience ticket purchases and projections, donor giving and trends must all receive their share of attention. The best executives run organizations in which good management practices are carried out rigorously; if the executive does not handle management chores personally, they are delegated to other staff members who make sure they get done.

One component of good management is the alignment of operations. The best leaders understand this. They know that all members of their team must be marching to the same drumbeat, pursuing the same goal. We've all heard stories of presenters who announce a new emphasis on customer service, only to have untrained box office personnel fail to live up to the promise. These presenters have failed to align operations within their organizations, which suffer for it. By contrast, the most effective executives make sure that all members of their team understand their own duties and how they fit into the whole; they communicate new directives to everyone who might need to be informed. These leaders look at the big picture, but don't neglect its parts, asking questions like: How should the staff be organized? How should the various departments communicate with one another? How

should the organization be positioned in the marketplace? They see to it that all components of the organization serve the mission and vision of the whole.

At a ballet company that recently reorganized itself, the executive made sure there were good connections between the professional company, its school and its neighborhood centers; as a result, all sectors cooperate with one another and all are aware of the others' importance to the whole. Likewise, at an arts center on the campus of a leading university, the renewed emphasis of the mission is to stimulate the student body's interest in art. To align all operations behind that mission, the executive there has created the center's own department of student programming and services, which is the catalyst for participatory activities in fine and performing arts and outreach efforts to the entire student body.

3

The most effective leaders work hard to make their staffs and boards feel valued. Making people feel valued can be accomplished in a variety of ways. One way is as simple as saying thank you for a job well done, a small gesture that is too often forgotten. Another is to give praise when praise is due, both in private and in public, at staff meetings or wherever appropriate. True and honest recognition of a good job – not empty flattery – will usually inspire people to continue their good work. These common courtesies not only elicit better performance, they serve as an example of how to deal with others that everyone in the organization – from ticket-taker to artist – can follow.

Some executives take this a step further and say thank you in a more formal way. Employees at a public television station love the perk that comes with being named employee of the month: a VIP parking space. And there are plenty of other ways to express gratitude. The executive at a small folk art organization working within a limited travel budget has found a way to take a different staff member along to every conference, which refreshes the staff person's perspective at the same time that it strengthens the institution. Similarly, a major repertory theatre has a program for trustees which offers them an in-depth look at a particular production. During this "internship," the trustee has the chance to observe the first read-through, the design meetings, tech and dress rehearsals and gets to know the cast and crew. Trustees who have participated say they have found it an enriching and enlightening experience that has given them a greater appreciation of the artistic process, made them better informed as board members and strengthened their ties to the theater.

Effective executives also understand that as much as their employees might love their work, a thank you, whether formal or informal, goes only so far. To be blunt, money talks. And in these times of tight budgets, so do humane working conditions, fairness and equity. Making a workplace humane can mean ensuring that employees actually take their scheduled vacations and days off, creating manageable workloads, and acknowledging that family crises require staff members' attention. Making a workplace fair and equitable should mean creating and administering pay and benefits even-handedly.

Finally, great leaders know that their own approach to the job, day in and day out, can do as much as anything else to make the people around them feel valued. These leaders bring the same passion and creativity to the board and the rehearsal hall; they give equal energy to the annual capital campaign and the program selection meeting.

All of these measures require some effort, but the pay-off is worth it. If employees feel valued, if they believe their organizations are run in a spirit of humanity, fairness and equity, they'll more willingly accept hard decisions that must be made; they'll be more likely to put their faith in their leadership and persevere through difficult times.

4

The most effective leaders relate to staff members and trustees with an open and interested style and have a high tolerance for debate within the organization. The executive who listens encourages a staff and board whose members express ideas and make contributions. Great ideas might not be

forthcoming all the time, but an open-door policy creates a level of comfort for the sharing of these ideas when they do come. The executive who cultivates an open and interested style will be rewarded with a staff that is brave enough to share both good news and bad. This executive will hear the new and creative ideas and be alerted to potential problems early on.

An open style will reap powerful ideas and solutions; it will also reveal areas of disagreement. The most effective leaders understand that strong, healthy organizations can weather debate. They do not fear a free exchange of information, but welcome it with the understanding that open dialogue will result in better decisions for the organization.

The executive director of a complex of four museums instituted a major organizational change with an open approach that brought immeasurable rewards. She wanted to centralize aspects of the educational work of each museum in order to provide the public, particularly parents and teachers, with still more innovative programming. She could have issued an “executive order” to accomplish her goal. Instead, she met with the head of education of each museum separately in order to understand their unique issues and programs and then arranged for a day-long meeting with all four of them and their staffs. The meeting was run like a professional seminar, with plenary meetings interspersed with small-group break-out sessions. Opposing points of view were aired and vested interests and fears about the proposed changes were respectfully examined. This was possible because the executive went into the meetings without a preconceived idea about the outcome. She did not take a defensive posture; nor did she impose her ideas on the group. She listened carefully and showed that she was open to new ideas. The result was a plan for action that refined the initial concept and rallied the staff to make it work. It represented their thinking as much as hers, and suggested new and exciting opportunities, which although they required some restructuring and changes in job responsibilities, have been implemented with success and enthusiasm.

In cultivating openness, these executives do not shrink from exposing their own thoughts to scrutiny. They don’t expect others to share while they sit in judgment, safe in a veneer of infallibility. They work at developing humility, offering up their ideas and showing that they are open to discussion. They also cultivate habits of self-scrutiny and self-criticism, and take pains to acknowledge and learn from their mistakes.

This sort of openness and honesty shouldn’t drag down the atmosphere into solemnity and gloom. A sense of humor and a light touch can just as easily create the kind of openness that strengthens an organization. A shared laugh can create a happy, creative environment, defuse a tense discussion and stimulate productive brainstorming.

The new CEO of a large science center brought a new vision that resulted in many changes in the institution. His attitude and management style fostered an atmosphere in which the staff felt comfortable enough to develop a skit that dealt humorously with the general institutional uncertainty and their own anxieties. Their performance at a joint board/staff meeting helped alleviate tension and leveled the playing field by gently poking fun at everyone, including the new CEO, and lightly prodding those members of the staff and board who hadn’t yet bought into the changes.

5

The most effective leaders have the courage to take necessary risks. That is, they manage risk. They know that without risk there is no progress. They don’t rush into perilous undertakings, but neither do they avoid risk at all costs. By contrast, some executives are averse to any uncertainty; they believe their charge is to maintain their foothold. They don’t realize that by staying put – avoiding the obvious risks – they can actually elevate the risk and increase the danger of losing ground. The most effective executives assess risk from all points of view. What are the possible consequences of the proposed action? What are the ramifications of not acting?

At one theatre company, the artistic director wished to stage a play by an infamous foreign playwright, that would be, for its audiences, extremely controversial. It would be quite risky. The public

and the theatre's supporters might be offended by it. It might lose a substantial amount of money. In fact, it had the potential to be a financial and public relations disaster. But once proposed, the idea became irresistible to both staff and board. And so, the managing director came up with a plan to produce the play outside the regular subscription season. The board agreed to raise funds specifically for the play, thereby limiting the company's financial risk. To everyone's relief, the steps taken to manage the unusual risk had generated so much discussion and excitement about the play that when it was staged, audiences loved it. The production played to capacity and won universal praise from the critics. It even made money. The two executives had had the courage to act on their vision, to take the risk – and to temper that risk with good sense and creativity.

Of course, the other side of taking risks is accountability; executives must understand the ramifications of risks that don't turn out as planned. They must accept responsibility and they must be prepared with other plans. The founder/artistic director of a small theatre company fell in love with the work of a noted playwright and successfully developed local funding to commission a work for the upcoming season. As the season approached, all of the theatre's promotional and subscription materials prominently featured the new play, which was described as a major artistic high point for the company and its community. A few weeks before casting was to begin, the playwright informed the artistic director that he would be unable to complete the play as promised. Although the theatre was able to fill the production slot with a fine revival, significant financial complications and community disappointment ensued. It would have been easy to blame the playwright, but the founder accepted full responsibility for the unexpected change in plans. He worked with the board and staff to resolve the financial complications, personally contacted each of the theatre's subscribers to explain the last-minute substitution and negotiated a refund/donation of the original commissioning grant. The theatre's board, its staff and the local community responded favorably to his handling of a difficult situation.

6

Effective leaders facilitate decision-making. Making decisions can be hard. It can be painful. Effective leaders fashion a decision-making process that guides them through the hard and the easy decisions. The process requires preparation: getting the facts, stretching mentally to overcome personal prejudice, seeking opinions from all sides, from others both inside and outside the organization, assessing the outcome, considering the ethical ramifications, checking the various possibilities against organizational mission.

The willingness to make a decision is critical. As the saying goes, not to decide is to decide. It might sound as though we're stating the obvious, but there are times when the temptation to put off a decision is strong, even for the best executives. At these times, tabling a decision seems more palatable than choosing between unattractive options. But deferring such choices often compounds the problem. Consider the executive who put off the decision on whether to cut her budget by 10 percent. The season progressed, finances didn't improve, and the following season she had no choice but to make a 25 percent cut.

We've seen executives put undue pressure on themselves and their staffs by looking for the "perfect" decision. Most of the time, there is no perfect decision, and the best course of action is to set a deadline, weigh the options, make the decision and move on.

7

Effective leaders keep the future of the organization in mind. An executive's day overflows with imperatives – issues positive and negative, from both the programming and operations divisions of the organization – that demand attention right away. It's tempting to deal only with what's at hand, to react to each crisis as it erupts. But successful executives carve out time to consider the future. They use the institutional mission as the touchstone for these deliberations, and try, as best they can, to ascertain what their organizations might face in the future and then position them to do so. Will future audiences be sufficiently engaged by the mission to support it? What demographic trends might

affect the organization? What's happening in the business community that might affect donations? What is the most intelligent allocation of resources; how much money should go to infrastructure and how much to future programming? What else is on the horizon? How does it all relate to mission? Is it time to fine-tune the mission? Good leaders consider these questions from all angles. And when they do, they are taking steps to ensure the future.

In one case, a performing arts center in a major city typically spent much effort, rightfully, on creating programs that would continue to attract its audience, which had been loyal so far. But its leadership knew that the center's future depended not just on programming, but on the vitality of the downtown and they decided not to wait for urban blight to gradually overtake their neighborhood. The center's leadership initiated discussions with city officials, adjoining property owners and representatives of the local hospitality industry to develop a master plan for the revitalization of the arts district. Through innovative funding, a special taxing district and frank discussions about the future of the area, the center was able to convince a number of partners to join it in acquiring and renovating properties for both performance and ancillary use. Today, the center operates several theatres, serves as a landlord for a number of busy restaurants and shops and owns the land on which a national hotel chain has erected a new luxury hotel.

Responding to the same kind of situation, an urban symphony had finally retired a large debt and was enjoying a period of stability and success. But its executive knew it was not time for complacency. He invited community leaders who were not members of the arts world to take part in a think tank, and at this gathering, he had a chance to ask experts in other fields what the community would look like in ten years. The answer – that potential audiences would be moving to the open land suburbs, while expensive public transportation projects to link city and suburb would not be forthcoming – caused the symphony's leaders to rethink their strategy. They are beginning to incorporate suburban performances into their seasons, to keep the symphony close to its audience. As the community changes, the symphony will change with it.

8

The most effective leaders do not neglect the issue of succession. When they look to the future of the organization, these executives apply the same encompassing vision to their own roles. In the cultural community, it was not unusual for a talented and charismatic leader to spend all or most of his career with a single organization. The habit produced wonderful results, but sometimes also caused crises when the leader could no longer lead. Even in founder-driven organizations – a dance company led by a brilliant choreographer who creates all or most of the company's programming season after season, for example – some thought must be given to what will happen to that company when the founder is gone. Will the company continue? Will it add new work by other artists to its repertoire? How will it meet the future?

The most effective executives consider the future before it arrives. They discuss succession with their boards and encourage the creation of a procedure to insure an orderly transition.

The best executives also engage in a continual self-inventory that helps them to know when and if they should move on. There are times when an executive's style no longer suits the needs of the organization. A good executive acknowledges this, too, and acts on it if necessary.

We must add, however, that we've seen some very effective executives prepare for succession in a far less drastic way. They do this as they go about their daily routines, without ever mentioning the word succession: they serve as mentors to others in the field, both within and outside their own organizations. They do all they can to develop their staffs, and encourage participation in professional and educational activities. They help everyone who works for them to learn as much and give as much as possible. And they make sure that when they do move on, the organization they leave is strong enough to weather the transition and embrace the opportunities a new leader will create.

• • •

The best leaders possess vision, align operations, make their colleagues feel valued, are open and interested, manage risk, make decisions, and consider the future. These are among the traits and habits that contribute to real leadership. It's important to remember, however, that these traits won't add up to much if they are not translated into action on an ever-broadening scale.

This is the challenge that faces all of us who aspire to become better leaders. We live in difficult and changing times – times which reflect, to some degree, the lack of leadership in defining the role of culture in today's society. While it is critical to lead our individual cultural institutions in an effective and positive way, it is equally critical to project that leadership beyond individual institutions to the society as a whole. Each person who aspires to lead a cultural institution must also make a commitment to strengthening the connections of their institution to others and to the larger community. For without the combined strength of the many, each will be weak.

There is no room for complacency, self-pity, aloofness or jealousy. At stake is the very survival and the legacy of all our cultural achievements. We need great leaders. The responsibility is ours . . .