

## The Executive Search Process: Organizational Considerations during a Crisis

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During times of crisis, such as global pandemics, economic crashes, and social unrest, the need for strong and diverse leadership is greater than ever. A strategic chief executive officer can quickly determine organizational priorities, mitigate damage, and set an organization up for eventual recovery and long-term success. A visionary artistic director or chief curator can seamlessly adapt programs to different venues or to a virtual format. A skilled chief development officer can identify donors who will allow the organization to meet payroll. A thoughtful chief marketing officer can deliver impactful and transparent messaging about an organization's plan for the future while highlighting its embedded values and commitments. A practical chief financial officer can carefully analyze the situation and present sustainability options. These positions and many other dedicated staff members, board leaders, and volunteers can navigate uncertainty during and after a crisis.

An article from *The New York Times* recently stated that, "While institutions might be expected to suspend hiring, some have accelerated or even initiated searches, given the current need for strong leadership."<sup>1</sup> Launching an executive search can be a challenge when external threats are at play. However, to emerge from an uncertain environment, arts and culture leaders can take cautious steps to ensure that the right people with the right skills and competencies are in place. This issue of *Arts Insights*, the first in a two-part series, explores the organizational considerations that must be evaluated when launching and conducting an executive search process during a crisis.

### The Anatomy of a Crisis

A crisis is an event or sequence of events in which decisions made, for better or worse, lead to a significant turning point. The period after a crisis is greatly impacted by the actions made during a crisis. Crisis management planning and response can be used to shape a more positive outcome in considering the myriad of choices that organizational leaders face in trying to ensure their survival.

When external crises occur, arts and culture organizations are forced to make dramatic cuts in response to a sharp decline in both earned and contributed revenues. The first area for these cuts is often personnel, as staffing costs are typically the single biggest ongoing expense for an organization. Once the crisis has passed and it is time to consider restoring staff, many organizations miss a key opportunity to evaluate their newly found business models. They often hire for the same positions that were eliminated even if there is no longer a need for that work. Organizations should look at how a growth strategy could be built into their planning with new or revised positions being restructured as institutional milestones are developed.

### Assess Organizational Needs and Structure

Arts and culture organizations should use external crises as an opportunity to reevaluate their operating models and to determine which positions within it are essential. Essential positions are those that provide organizational structure and stability. This does not mean that other positions are not important but in a retrenchment they are not considered essential to the short-term survival of the organization. Filling essential positions is even more important to an organization's long-term success than ever before. As Jim Collins defined in *Good to Great for the Social Sectors*, having the right people on the bus is a key element to ensuring an organization and its goals are optimized.

The process of hiring key personnel should not be done in haste. Resist the temptation to quickly hire or promote for expediency. Crises may unfold abruptly and rapidly but the assessment of the organization's current culture and the team's experience should be carefully considered in designing a well-planned search process. It is critical to

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Pogrebin, "Could There Be a More Difficult Time to Become an Arts Leader?," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/arts/design/museums-arts-leadership-coronavirus-protests.html>.

first complete an organizational analysis to determine the brutal facts of the current situation and then hire based on the work needed now and in the future.

Time is a limited resource for arts and culture organizations so it should be carefully spent during a crisis. Rather than making a rushed permanent appointment, engaging an interim leader or senior management professional can help guide an organization through this transition. When survival is at stake, an experienced interim leader—whether internal or external—can get results and prioritize high value projects. Skilled interim leaders can overcome organizational inertia and concentrate on initiatives that will have immediate impacts on the organization.<sup>2</sup>

### **Stay Focused on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Access**

Times of crisis are fraught with distractions that can steer arts and culture organizations away from their core values—such as diversity and inclusion. Now more than ever, a diversity of voices and experiences is needed to guide an organization toward a more stable future. Throughout the executive search process, arts and culture leaders must stay laser focused on equity, diversity, inclusion, and access. The lack of diversity in the arts and culture sector is its own crisis. Organizational leaders should continue to embrace more equitable hiring practices despite any external factors affecting the organization.

### **Partner with an Executive Search Firm**

To keep organizational energy focused on the short-term crisis, partnering with an executive search firm can ensure that the tremendous task of identifying, cultivating, interviewing, and placing highly qualified candidates can be done without impacting daily organizational work.<sup>3</sup> Times of crisis are ideal for not only evaluating key positions' duties and responsibilities, but also critically looking at the organization's needs and any underlying business model issues that were exposed as a result of the crisis.

A concise job description is the foundation of an effective executive search. It is essential to evaluate an equitable compensation structure and the impact the crisis may have on it—within both the organization and the marketplace. An inclusive search committee with a diversity of perspectives should be assembled. Technology should be leveraged to ensure that the search committee and other key stakeholders can begin the search process expeditiously. Conference calls and video meetings are valuable tools when in-person committee meetings are not possible or easily scheduled. Virtual convenings can also be used to facilitate key interviews with semi-finalist and finalist candidates. An executive search firm can manage remote meetings, facilitate interviews, and create objective interview questions, shaping a process that allows for committee input. They can also take the committee through to the final stages of the search virtually, if needed.

### **Conclusion**

While leadership transitions should be made a high priority, a challenging landscape is not the time to make decisions that preference expediency over quality, which includes a focus on inclusion, diversity, equity, and candidate access to the search committee for serious consideration. With proper planning, structure, and a clear process, it is possible to conduct a successful executive search during a major crisis. Organizations can strategically move forward with a plan that ensures long-term success within these critical moments and beyond. A crisis will not end merely because a new executive leader or senior management team member has stepped into a role. However, they will have joined arms with the existing team to help move the organization forward together with resiliency.



### **Wyona Lynch-McWhite, Senior Vice President**

Wyona Lynch-McWhite joined ACG in 2016, bringing more than 21 years of experience leading art, university, and multidisciplinary museums. Her areas of expertise include executive search, museum planning, organizational assessments, strategic visioning, fundraising, and diversity training. As an Executive Search practice leader, she has led numerous search processes throughout the United States and Canada, placing executive leaders for a wide range of nonprofit organizations, universities, and government agencies. Ms. Lynch-McWhite has also provided effective solutions in the areas of earned revenue enhancement, strategic planning, and museum planning for clients such as Collier County Museum Division, High Desert Museum, and Civil Rights Institute of Inland Southern California. Prior to joining ACG, she served as the Executive Director of the Fruitlands

<sup>2</sup> Jenna Deja, "Creating Effective Leadership Transitions Six Myths of Interim Management," *Arts Insights*, 2018, <https://artsconsulting.com/arts-insights/misperceptions-and-benefits-of-engaging-a-professional-executive-search-firm/>.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce D. Thibodeau, "The Misperceptions and Benefits of Engaging a Professional Executive Search Firm," *Arts Insights*, 2019, <https://artsconsulting.com/arts-insights/creating-effective-leadership-transitions-six-myths-of-interim-management/>.

Museum and Fuller Craft Museum. Ms. Lynch-McWhite was previously a Director-at-Large and Program Committee Co-Chair on the South Eastern Museums Conference governing council and has served as a National Grant Reviewer for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. A 2006 participant in the Getty Center's Museum Leadership Institute, she currently serves as the Leadership and Management Network Chairperson of the American Alliance of Museums and as a board member of the New England Museum Association. Ms. Lynch-McWhite graduated Magna Cum Laude with a bachelor of science degree from Florida A&M University and holds a master of fine arts degree from Columbia College, Chicago.



### **Jane V. Hsu, Associate Vice President**

Bringing 20 years of experience in museum and nonprofit arts organization leadership, Associate Vice President Jane V. Hsu is committed to public and cultural engagement and driven by innovation and deep levels of active participation. Her areas of expertise include project management, strategic community partnerships, integrated artist engagement, employee mentoring and evaluation, and equity, diversity, and inclusion education. Prior to joining ACG, she served as the Head of Engagement at the Rubin Museum of Art, where she managed creative and communication teams to produce compelling and unforgettable contemporary art experiences accessible for all ages and diverse audiences. She also reinvented museum-wide, high-impact engagement strategies by integrating contemporary art environments with an Asian art museum. As the Manager of Interpretation at the New

Museum of Contemporary Art, she was a key champion for community outreach activities when the museum launched its groundbreaking building in the historical Lower East Side neighborhood. Additionally, she established accessibility and inclusion practices with programming that reinvented museum spaces for greater engagement with diverse and multigenerational audiences. An expert in contemporary art and documentary film practice, she is a curator of Chinese documentary films focused on issues of gender, sexuality, and domestic violence. She serves as adjunct faculty at New York University, Columbia University, The City University of New York, and Metropolitan College of New York, teaching courses in arts administration, art history, and film theory. Ms. Hsu holds a bachelor of fine arts in design and video from The Cooper Union School of Art in New York, a master of business administration in media management from Metropolitan College of New York, and a master of arts in film and East Asian studies from Columbia University School of the Arts.



### **Bruce D. Thibodeau, President**

Dr. Bruce D. Thibodeau founded ACG in 1997 and has guided hundreds of nonprofit, university, and government clients in achieving effective leadership transitions, planning cultural facilities, increasing revenues, developing dynamic institutional brands and messages, crafting strategic plans and business models, and revitalizing board governance practices. He has also conducted extensive research in a threefold exploration of stakeholders, nonprofit arts management, and cultural facility project management and has facilitated numerous community engagement processes that have increased the public dialogue and stakeholder awareness of the arts and culture sector's value and impact on communities. As both a researcher and practitioner, his expertise highlights the important roles of project champions and followers as they overcome inertia and gain momentum

derived from their social connections, personal commitments, and financial capacities to support the arts and culture sector. Prior to founding ACG, Dr. Thibodeau held various management roles at the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Price Waterhouse, and Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles. He is a regular guest speaker at national and international arts, culture, and academic conferences and has several published papers. Dr. Thibodeau holds a doctorate of business administration from the Grenoble Ecole de Management (France), a master of business administration from the F.W. Olin Graduate School of Business at Babson College, and a bachelor of music from The Hartt School at the University of Hartford. He also has multiple certifications in competencies, communications, and motivations analysis from Target Training International.

**Contact ACG for more information on how we can help your organization with its inclusive, diverse, equitable, and accessible leadership transitions.**

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