

Off to a Good Start: Three Strategic Focus Areas for First-Time Executives

María Muñoz-Blanco, Vice President

Who can forget the excitement (and a bit of apprehension) of that first day as the executive leader for an arts and culture organization? It takes years of preparation, long hours, and a singular focus on achievements, culminating in an opportunity to lead a mission-driven organization. For senior arts and culture leaders, reaching that top leadership role marks the beginning of a complex journey where neither success nor longevity are guaranteed.

It has been more than 15 years since *Harvard Business Review* published the oft-cited statistic that two out of five CEOs fail in their first 18 months.¹ Consequent research, in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, show that turnover at the executive level is a growing concern. For the nonprofit sector, the generational transition in leadership—a concern that has been an important topic since the early part of the century—is no longer a future problem. Many arts and culture executives who started their careers through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act programs of the late 1970s have reached retirement age. This means that a new cohort of leaders is stepping into their first C-suite roles. An earlier issue of *Arts Insights* proposed 10 key steps in the first 90 days for a new leader to build credibility and lay the foundation for a successful role.² This issue of *Arts Insights* examines three strategic focus areas for the first-time executive that will further strengthen their professional success and longevity.

Networking

There is universal acknowledgment of the value of networking for career progression, identifying peers and mentors as impactful aides in professional development. At the C-suite level, a first-time executive's expanded portfolio of responsibilities may make it difficult to set aside time for networking. However, the value of maintaining and expanding professional and personal networks at this stage cannot be overlooked.

According to business scholars Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter, it is essential for a new leader to embrace the relational tasks of networking, not as a distraction from workplace responsibilities but as essential to their success. Clearly posited by the authors, "the alternative to networking is to fail—either in reaching for a leadership position or in succeeding at it."³ Ibarra and Hunter delve further into the value of networking, identifying the following three interdependent forms of networking and how they can be used by new leaders in their path to success:

Operational Networking - Building and nurturing relationships primarily with internal team members to maintain or expand the capacity of the team, ensuring cooperation and building trust to achieve results

Personal Networking - Outward looking, widening the circle of contacts through professional associations and special interest groups and gaining new perspectives and a deeper understanding of the community and business/nonprofit environments

Strategic Networking - Leveraging networks and enlisting new internal and external partners to influence or to advance business or organizational priorities

Effective networking is not limited to peers or influencers within one's field of work or geographic region. Consider leaders within adjacent fields of practice, whether nonprofit or business, where issues of access, customer service, and resource development have many commonalities with the arts and culture sector.

¹ Dan Ciampa, "Almost Ready: How Leaders Move Up," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005. <https://hbr.org/2005/01/almost-ready-how-leaders-move-up>, January 13, 2021.

² Pamela A. Pantos, "Your First 90 Days: New Job, New Challenges, New Opportunities." *Arts Insights*, Volume XV, Issue 2, 2016.

³ Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter, "How Leaders Create and Use Networks," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2007, <https://hbr.org/2007/01/how-leaders-create-and-use-networks>, January 13, 2021.

For the new executive following a founder (or perhaps a long-tenured senior leader), the initial reaction may be to shy away from networking with the departing leader. However, the opposite may prove beneficial to both the new leader and to the organization.⁴

Accountability

The new executive has been hired to move the organization forward. Typically, the board of directors will have identified organizational priorities and charged the new leader with achieving results that support the organization's growth and sustainability. Personal accountability—being answerable for personal actions—is frequently identified by executive search committees as one of the key competencies required for superior performance in executive positions.

Establishing a culture of accountability begins with the senior leader. It is not unusual, or unexpected, for the new executive to take a few missteps or make mistakes as they adapt to their new responsibilities and gain a greater understanding of their organization's culture. In a recent article, Vince Molinaro suggests that leadership accountability should be a priority for the executive leader, both at the personal level and in setting the expectation for their senior team.⁵ Setting the tone, acknowledging mistakes when they happen, and articulating the path to learn from and correct mistakes build the team's confidence in the new leader.

Effective accountability embraces transparency. The new leader should work with the board and staff to adopt a clear and concise set of key indicators for their own performance, connecting those with the overall organizational goals. The use of dashboards that are easily accessible to staff and key stakeholders emphasize the importance of accountability in a results-driven organization.

Continuous Learning

It is often said that an organization's greatest asset is its personnel and perhaps there is no field where this is truer than in the arts and culture sector. The creative minds that fuel this sector—the writers, composers, musicians, actors, artists, designers—are avid learners. Many new arts and culture leaders are trained artists or performers who have acquired their management know-how through experience and discovery.

Professionals in medicine, law, accounting, engineering, architecture, and other fields are typically required to engage in continuous learning to practice their profession or, when applicable, maintain their official licensure. There is no such requirement or mandatory training for executives in the arts and culture sector. Graduate degrees are often considered a plus by hiring boards and while they do provide solid foundation for management, there are many gaps to be filled by experience and post-graduate learning.

The value of professional development and providing those learning experiences to staff has become a priority for many arts and culture organizations, albeit limited by the fiscal realities of the sector. COVID-19 has made arts and culture professionals increasingly comfortable with virtual learning and the availability of free and low-cost professional development opportunities has also expanded during the pandemic. Most arts and culture organizations have encouraged their teams to take advantage of these new resources.

For the new nonprofit leader, carving out time to expand their knowledge base, learn about new trends or ideas, and further develop their skills may not be a priority, but it should be. The humility to recognize knowledge gaps and the initiative to pursue learning are traits to be appreciated. New senior executives should include learning goals as a component of their own performance plan. To develop this plan, the new leader may consider working with a coach or consultant on an assessment or inventory of skills to identify critical areas of growth and to develop this learning plan.

⁴ Jari Tuomala, Donald Yeh, and Katie Milway, "Making Founder Successions Work," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2018. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/making_founder_successions_work, January 13, 2021.

⁵ Vince Molinaro, "Make Leadership Accountability a Priority," SHRM's Executive Network Blog. <https://blog.shrm.org/executive/blogpost/Make-Leadership-Accountability-a-Priority>, January 13, 2021.

Conclusion

As the new leader at any arts and culture organization, particularly for first-time leaders, the first year will have a lasting impact on not only the professional's career but also the organization that they lead. Stepping into a new role and taking on an expanded portfolio of responsibilities with a board and staff will largely be the focus of the new leader's time. For long-term success, the first-time executive must also build and expand their professional networks, foster accountability and transparency, and embrace continuous learning opportunities that enhance their knowledge and skillset.



María Muñoz-Blanco, Vice President

María Muñoz-Blanco joined ACG in 2020, bringing more than 25 years of experience in the arts, culture, and public sectors, specifically within arts service, venue management, and grantmaking organizations. Her work in the public sector has focused on improving quality of life in diverse communities, expanding programs and services in the arts and parks, and successfully integrating diverse voices from a broad spectrum of creative organizations and artists. Prior to joining ACG, she led public agencies in Dallas, Houston, and Memphis, managing multidisciplinary programs, capital projects, and public-private partnerships with performing arts organizations, museums, cultural centers, and sports and recreational facilities. She has implemented arts education and literacy programs for youth in multiple settings, capacity building programs for emerging and midsize cultural organizations, public art programs with strong local artist participation opportunities, and a wide array of grants and funding programs. Ms. Muñoz-

Blanco has secured increased public investment in the arts and has sought opportunities for private investment in public projects, most recently managing a \$4.5 million partnership with a health corporation for the redevelopment of a neighborhood park. Her capital project experience includes opening the \$40 million Moody Performance Hall, planning for a cultural center in Dallas' Oak Cliff neighborhood, and managing \$5 million in improvements to the historic Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium in Memphis. Ms. Muñoz-Blanco holds a bachelor of arts in art theory, graduating magna cum laude from the University of Puerto Rico, and a master of arts in art history from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She has also pursued graduate studies in mass communication and public relations at Florida International University and is a graduate of the Leadership Memphis program. She has served on the Texans for the Arts Board of Directors and co-chaired the Civic Common Areas and Open Spaces working group of the Memphis 3.0 Comprehensive Plan.

Contact ACG for more information on how we can help support your organization's leadership transition.

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