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Arts Leaders and Arts Managers

Arts managers and arts leaders are two different animals...and arts institutions need both to excel.

By James Abruzzo, correspondent, New York, ja@artsmanagement.net

However, the unmet demand for arts leaders is greater today than at any other time. There are many reasons why the demand for leaders is growing and, unless some fundamental changes are made to encourage and develop the next generation, the gap will continue to increase and have a calamitous effect on the creativity and sustainability of arts institutions and on society. There are many arts managers but fewer leaders.

The arts lose money. Over the course of a season, almost every arts organization, performing arts center, theater company and museum operates with a deficit - the income generated cannot match the expenses.

In the mid nineteen sixties the increase in the number and size of US arts organizations accelerated and income from all sources - fundraised and earned - grew more slowly than costs. During this period, the start of the modern era of arts management, bridging the income gap became an important goal for the arts organization and the preoccupation of the person in charge. In 1966, Rudolf Bing, at the time, the General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera quipped, "Opera is an accountant's nightmare. Every time the curtain goes up a lot of money is lost." And what better method to eliminate the shortfall than by employing the corporate manager's approach of focusing on business process, designing compromise, creating bureaucratic structures and avoiding risk? The field of arts administration or arts management adopted the business school model of efficient management.

By the late 1990's, in Germany, France, and Great Britain, government funding as a percentage of arts budgets began to decline. That caused increased deficits. Following stages of denial and acceptance, the arts managers in Europe reluctantly began to adopt many US arts management principles of increasing income and reducing costs -fundraising, finance, marketing and increasing the efficiency of operations became the regiment of the new European arts manager, frequently to the chagrin of the veteran impresarios.

There is ample literature describing the differences between leaders and managers. Leaders shape rather than respond to ideas, they stimulate rather than regulate followers, they accept rather than minimize risk, and they proceed with courage. Leaders look outward and respond to the needs of society rather than solely to their enterprise. As one arts leader said, 'I get very concerned because the purpose, the reason; the mission is, in the end, about

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art... ninety percent of the time arts managers discuss the how to rather than the purpose of art and culture.' Arts leaders, like those in other nonprofit enterprises, are concerned with accessibility and relevance and sustainability. The arts leader must go further. The arts leader is charged with evaluating and distinguishing between arts and simple entertainment. He must invite and tolerate risk. According to a former general manager of Convent Garden, "The chap who cares about the artistic quality of the work will certainly sail nearer the wind or come closer to the border of what is financially affordable. He or she is the proper person to decide how close to that limit is right to push. Otherwise, you just get safe play."

One should be practical and not too pious,' said Phillip DeMontebello. 'Commercialism pays the bills and museums are not churches. But it is the mystery, the wonder, the presence of the real that is our singular distinction and that, we should proudly, joyfully proclaim.' But the arts leader has additional challenges. After all, he or she is leading an organization in new directions. 'Cultural leadership,' according to one writer, 'is offering patronage in the face of social hostility, it is the proselytizing and publicizing that will finally lead a reluctant audience to recognize the artist's contribution.' Another writes, 'the arts leader is making societal and education decisions about ... the production of material which is always openly or secretly disruptive - that is, art.'

The arts leader reaches beyond her enterprise to use the power of art to affect society. Not just by presenting traditional arts education programs, but by recognizing a responsibility to the greater good: offering reduced price studio space to struggling arts organizations; taking world class orchestras outside the concert hall to underprivileged school districts; creating city-wide festivals that celebrate western and other cultures and encourage a community's pop culture groups; or sending the senior management team to other countries to help build its arts infrastructure. And true arts leaders are generous with their personal time and wisdom as teachers, writers, arts advocates and mentors.

There is not a one behavioral trait, personality type or functional skill that distinguishes the arts leader. Arts managers and leaders both have a propensity to work long and hard, they both can communicate and direct and they are driven to achieve success. Mastering functional skills like fundraising or project management is a given. However, the current generation of the best arts leaders are also the former curators, actors, musicians or dancers whose past practice and performance influence their decision-making. Their intent and purpose, and their achievement, is to engage the artists and arts organizations to positively affect society.

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