



Grantmakers in the Arts

GIAreader

Vol. 21 No. 1, Spring 2010

Ideas and Information on Arts and Culture

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Russell Willis Taylor and Andrew Taylor

Reprinted from the *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*
Volume 21, No. 1 (Spring 2010)
2010 Grantmakers in the Arts

Grantmakers in the Arts
4055 21st Avenue West
Suite 100
Seattle, WA 98199-1247
(206) 624-2312

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The Smart Marketplace

Bridging the Gaps in Arts Leadership Training

Russell Willis Taylor and Andrew Taylor

The conversations that flow among our field's funders, professional conferences, and boardrooms suggest that there are two principle barriers to strong future leadership in the arts: a shortage of high-potential managers in the pipeline, and a sparse offering of professional training to prepare them for the task. And yet a quick survey of the environment shows that we are literally surrounded by both. Our organizations, communities, and universities are rich in young people who are passionate about the arts — great prospects for future leadership roles. And nationally, the multitude of offerings for professional development includes such varied products as informal mentorships, workshops, peer learning groups, executive education, and full-time residential degree programs.

We suggest that neither the quality of prospective leaders nor the quantity of professional training opportunities is the problem. Rather, we are missing a free-flowing and responsive information network that would help match the two more effectively. In other words, as a field we have neither a supply nor a demand problem; we have a classic market inefficiency. This article explores that inefficiency, and suggests ways in which cultural professionals might find the training they need, when they need it, and in the form that serves them best.

(NB: Neither of us is a disinterested party in this topic; we each lead programs at different points on the educational spectrum. Our work, however, gives us a unique perspective on the challenges of designing and delivering effective professional development programs and the disconnects that seem to be plaguing the field.)

Particular Challenges in the Arts

In many professions, there are clear and linear progressions of training for which people prepare from an early stage in their education or career paths. Graduate and post-graduate education is prescriptively laid out along with ongoing certification requirements for leaders, as in the fields of medicine and engineering. In corporate structures, promising leaders are often identified early and given guidance and support to pursue executive education specific to their industry. High-potential new recruits may go through formalized “rotation” programs to gain hands-on experience in all aspects of the corporation. Midlevel or seasoned executives may even

have access to customized corporate training programs or “company universities” such as Crotonville for GE. Industry standards, custom, and practice provide early screening and ongoing support for leaders in which significant investment will be made throughout their careers.

In the arts, leaders come from a broad field of experience and inclination, often with a much narrower set of skills when they take on leadership roles. Artistically accomplished leaders, or managers who specialize in one area of operations (e.g., fundraising or marketing), may be promot-

ed to leadership roles with very little general management training. And the pressures of under-resourced organizations leave little time for training or indeed for reflection on training needs. The talent for “learning

on the job” has an admirable credibility but can be unwise when taken to extremes: Nonprofit cultural leaders with no construction or project management experience may find themselves leading complex building projects; managers with little or no financial training may be called upon to make revenue and risk decisions for which they are not fully prepared. Many if not most cultural leaders rise to the occasion but at a cost to themselves and to their organizations.

It is often unclear which skills people need to learn and when. The press of day-to-day business can easily trump professional development, as well as the market scanning required to find the right learning opportunity. The rapid pace of change facing all elements of cultural management only makes matters worse, from the rise of social media to the fall of credit and financial markets. Such change makes the direct application of received knowledge and common practice less effective, and the need for new insights and business innovations more pronounced.

Mapping the Terrain

It should come as no surprise that the professional development ecology in arts and culture is more fractured and less transparent than in other more long-lived and well-resourced industries. There are no arts institutions of similar scope and scale to the multinational corporations that developed the integrated professional development strategies and programs described earlier. And as a professional field, nonprofit arts and culture management spans only five decades or so, a fraction of the professional histories of other industries.

Despite its distributed nature and relative youth, however, the network of development providers for arts and cultural professionals has generated a vast number and variety of learning opportunities. From beginner-focused “nuts and bolts” workshops at national conventions, to local

and regional peer learning networks, to informal mentor relationships and more formalized intergenerational learning programs, to third-party professional training seminars, to on-line webinars and discussion forums, to full-time, resident degree programs at the undergraduate and master's level, arts professionals have a dizzying array of choices to extend their skills and advance their learning.

Yet nobody in the system — consumer or producer — has a full inventory of the options available, nor the full range of information required to connect a particular need with a menu of appropriate choices. Opportunities are clustered by artistic discipline, region, job function, peer network, or common funder, when learning needs are rarely so easily segmented.

And professional development providers, like the managers they seek to train, are often constrained by time, money, and opportunity to explore the richness of the offerings around them.

The natural result of widely differing needs and a flood of unrelated product on the market is that both consumers and providers of professional development feel disconnected. Consumers find the marketplace bewildering: there is a rift between what people want and need and what they know is “out there.” Providers face an audience fractured by discipline, career stage, geography, learning needs, and learning preference that makes marketing expensive and responsive program design difficult.

We suggest that this disconnect between supply and demand leads to the commonly stated sentiment on one side that there is a shortage of training, and the fear on the other that high-potential leaders for the field are lacking. We believe that our field lacks effective and connected information about training that might help both consumers and providers find each other at the right time. This premise suggests that the best way to develop a more vibrant and effective learning ecology would be to focus on improving the effectiveness of the marketplace, rather than seeking to boost either supply or demand.

Toward a More Effective Learning Marketplace

Our colleagues in economics tell us that efficient markets have certain qualities, at least in their ideal form. They are large with many buyers and sellers; they are coordinated by unified motives (usually defined as a search for maximum profit); they are easy for buyers and sellers to enter and exit; they convey instantaneous, accurate, and complete information about what's available; and their products are all the same.

While no one would argue that professional training offerings are homogeneous, nor that they should be, our description of the professional training ecology would come quite close on the other criteria detailed above. It is certainly large, with many buyers and sellers seeking connections. It is unified, if not by profit seeking, then by a common interest in building proficiency, professional standards, and effectiveness in arts and cultural leaders. There are easy ways to enter and exit the market both as a buyer and a seller, although most professional training initiatives do require significant investment in people, processes, and productive operations.

The largest gap between the optimal market and our current professional training marketplace is the availability of instantaneous, accurate, and complete information

about what's on offer. There is no central listing of all opportunities. Even the internet, in all its searching power, cannot provide one, since there is no common protocol for listing, labeling, or flagging such opportunities. Even the most seasoned professional development providers have only anecdotal information about the full range of programs available in other disciplines, regions, and related industries.

While “instantaneous, accurate, and complete” may be a distant goal given our current disconnect, we believe that there are three primary means to improve our marketplace: encouraging transparency among providers, fostering informed consumers, and enabling effective brokers.

Transparency could be achieved by centralizing information about professional training, an alternative that is unlikely to find favor with most providers. A more palatable alternative is greater collaboration in sharing information among providers who then pass this shared knowledge along to their constituencies. Multiple providers aggregating information and making it freely available to their constituents would most likely result in more connections, more responsive professional learning programs, fewer duplications, and better alignment of scarce resources toward the task. A high tide really can raise all boats.

Another informational disconnect is a shortage of *informed consumers*. People with a clear vision of their learning needs and preferences will be more likely to define and discover a match for those needs. Further, they will be more likely to continue training over their careers, as that vision is informed and refined with each learning experience. Such awareness and lifelong learning requires curiosity, discipline, and time — along with the active support of boards and executive leaders. Most will agree that our professional field has much work to do in encouraging, supporting, and rewarding this kind of reflection and directed learning.

Finally, both transparency and informed consumers could be encouraged by active and connected *brokers* to match professionals with training opportunities. Our field already has many such brokers, who combine a passion for professional development, a coach's ability to assess potential and need, and a broad knowledge of learning opportunities. Often the broker's role is an informal one, not part of an official job description, but rather taken on because of passion, purpose, or repayment for professional assistance received along the way. In many cases, professional training providers play the role of broker, as well. Both of us frequently speak with arts professionals seeking training and refer them to other providers to encourage the right fit. Any broker could be much more effective with better and broader information. Their essential role could be encouraged through validated through validation and focused support.

Compasses, Not Maps

Professional development works best when it is personalized: *This is what I need to learn, and this is how I learn best.* Accessible information about what is on offer matched with an understanding of what an individual needs will result in better choices, but understanding about the process of learning is also part of the mix. What's needed is a *learning portfolio* that defines a blend of learning opportunities over the course of a career, including both formal and informal elements. Such a portfolio would incorporate "soft skills" as well as the more analytical skills and concepts; the desired mix would be different for everyone. Coaching and mentoring can help with this "learning diagnosis." Reading, reflection, peer-to-peer advising, standards of practice, and cross-disciplinary discussion can also inform the learning portfolio over the course of an arts professional's career.

There are many ways to continually improve as a leader through education. In our view the best professional education provides a compass rather than a map. In other words, learning provides the knowledge, context, and confidence to shape solutions to the problems specific to your organization, rather than offering a guaranteed and predetermined "fix" for every challenge. An effective compass requires continuous calibration and a masterful orienteer with experience in the terrain, and a clear overview of the landscape.

Funders have important roles to play in improving the professional training marketplace and its impact on the field. First, they can encourage and support a culture of reflection and lifelong learning among their grantees and within

their funding agencies. Second, they can foster informed consumers and effective brokers by increasing transparency among existing professional training initiatives and by fostering collaboration across providers and domains. Finally, they can ensure that any new initiative they fund meets a professional need without duplicating an effective program already on offer. An effective marketplace will also encourage focus and impact by all of its independent providers.

But beyond the efforts of funders, professional development initiatives, or individual learners, a truly effective professional training marketplace is a systemic goal that requires system-wide strategy and commitment. By encouraging a greater degree of cooperation and information sharing, funders can help advance this effort. Crossing boundaries of discipline, domain, and organizational incentive will ensure that a next-generation professional training ecology can evolve to support our current — and future — leaders.

Russell Willis Taylor is president and CEO of National Arts Strategies. Andrew Taylor is director of the Bolz Center for Arts Administration in the Wisconsin School of Business.

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