

## Introduction

In 2008, Daniel “Dewey” Schott and I conducted statewide research in California on next generation arts leadership funded by The James Irvine Foundation. Our research included a survey of over 1200 arts leaders in California and dozens of interviews with people in arts service organizations, as well as arts consultants and leadership and professional development program providers nationwide. In addition we conducted ten focus groups throughout the state with young and new arts leaders to find out their joys, challenges and needs. At one of the first groups we held, one of the participants identified himself as a new executive director who, at 27 years of age, was in his first year on the job. He commented that “there are many times when I don’t know what I’m doing, and it’s not okay for me to say that I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Long after our research concluded and our report was submitted, I continue to think about this quote. The former first-time executive director in me identifies with what a lonely place it can be. The researcher in me wonders what others’ experiences are, and finally the consultant in me wonders what can be done to help. This essay is the culminating response to the latter two questions. It takes a closer look by asking: What do we know about the practical experiences of first-time executive directors? What do they need to know or what tools do they need in their toolkit to help them thrive and better ensure success?

The research I conducted for this article was a combination of personal accounts through interviews and focus groups with six first-time executive directors, data from 22 first-time executive directors who responded to a survey of NAMAC members, a review of literature and interviews with several people who work with and/or provide appropriate first-time leadership development programs. I also drew on the unpublished research we gathered and analyzed for The James Irvine Foundation.

The definition I established for first-time executive directors in this study is those who have never held the position before and have held it for less than five years. First-timers can be any age. While many are under 35, others are older, having held management positions in a different organization or being promoted from within. It does not include founding executive directors because there are different sets of issues for those who start organizations and populate their own staffs and boards of directors than for those who are hired into an existing organization by an established board of directors and with a predetermined staff. The research only included leaders of arts and culture organizations in the non-profit sector.

When I started my research I found that there is very little information available about the experiences and needs of first-time executive directors in the non-profit sector. There are studies such as Compass Point’s *Daring to Lead* (Bell, et al 2006) which describes executive director turnover projections, the role of burnout in these projections and the effect of low executive compensation on burnout. *Ready to Lead: Next Generation Leaders Speak Out* (Cornelius, et al, 2008) discusses the long hours and compromised personal lives that inhibit many emerging leaders from aspiring to the top rung. Yet they also provide hope by revealing that “despite the disincentives to becoming a non-profit executive director, our survey revealed a significant number of younger people who are willing, if not yet quite ready, to lead.” (Cornelius, et al, 2008,

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p. 3-4) They note that 40% of those who indicated that they aspire some day to be an executive director feel that are ready now or will be in the next five years.

But I have found little research that describes the experiences of those who have taken the leadership leap in the non-profit sector for the first-time and what we might learn from their experiences that can assist future first-timers. It is my hope that this essay encourages more discussion that will continue to build as the transition from established and retiring leaders to emerging executive leadership takes place in the coming years.

*There is no magic knowledge that will be bestowed upon you when you get the keys to the executive washroom.*

*- Tyler Richard Hewes, Executive Director - Orchestra Nova*

### **Preparation**

A distinguishing factor in all of my interviews with first-time executive leaders was their perceived preparedness for the job. Issues related to this topic included:

- Knowing how to work with a board of directors;
- Really understanding the differences between their role and the board's role;
- How much authority they felt they had going into the job;
- How prepared they were to use that authority;
- Knowing how to read, understand or manage financial information and processes;
- How much they could really prepare in advance; and
- How and if they let on that they didn't always know what they were doing.

We all assume that those who were leaders before us had some magic knowledge or preparation that made their transition successful; because what we see in our role models are people who are going about their business running the organizations we know and patronize and seemingly doing a good job of it. We assume that they took the position knowing how to do everything they do today. While it's a nice fantasy, it simply isn't true.

In Thomas J. Neff and James M. Citrin's book, *You're in Charge – Now What*, they describe the stories of for-profit sector business leaders and their experiences taking on the executive leadership of major national corporations. It may be helpful for those of you considering executive leadership in the future to know that many of those who became the CEO of a multi-million dollar business did not know everything before he or she took the job. What they may have had was the luxury of time to prepare before they actually received the keys to the executive washroom. But it was interesting to read that Paul Pressler, the former chairman of Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, took the chief executive position with The Gap without any prior experience as a CEO. He also moved from theme parks and entertainment to retail sales and fashion, two completely different industries. What he did was develop a style of straightforward communication and careful listening. "As a first-time CEO, Pressler did not pretend to be an expert at working with a board, and his disarming candor about being a neophyte was exactly the right approach. The board was thrilled at the prospect of starting a partnership based on mutual openness and respect." (Neff & Citrin, p. 5)

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One of my interviewees said that his favorite book is Michael Kaiser's *The Art of the Turnaround*, because Kaiser admits that he didn't always have all the answers. (And probably still doesn't.) Kaiser began as a corporate management consultant with a love of the arts. His first executive position in arts management was with the Kansas City Ballet. And while he had several celebrated turn arounds under his belt, his work at the Royal Opera House was less than stellar. *Telegraph.co.uk* Arts Correspondant, Stephen Adams wrote:

Michael Kaiser's book *The Art of the Turnaround* lays down 10 rules that he says must be followed to achieve success. But Mr Kaiser admitted he had only learned some of them through his failure to apply them at the start of his tenure in London. His two years running the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden from 1998 to 2000 were characterised by bad press, technical problems and constant in-fighting.... "I learned that I do not have a thick skin," he admitted. "I would go home and have a good cry. Then I would go sleep, get up in the morning and do it all over again." He announced his resignation from the post in June 2000, citing personal reasons, although a dispute with the board was believed to be one of the reasons for his departure. He is now president of the Kennedy Centre for the performing arts [sic] in Washington, D.C. (Adams, 2008).

The Royal Opera position wasn't Kaiser's first job as the head of a major cultural institution, providing proof that even having previous experience in the corner office doesn't promise an easy go of it and that his perceived failure in one organization did not hinder his ability to achieve other directorships. I don't share this story to discourage you from taking on an executive leadership position in the near future. On the contrary, it helped one first-timer realize that even successful directors have difficulties.

In our research for The James Irvine Foundation, Dewey and I learned that more than half of those surveyed who are interested in taking on greater leadership in an organization feel they need more training and/or more experience before they will be ready to lead. This corroborates the previously cited *Ready to Lead* findings and causes me to wonder if there really is such a thing as being prepared for your first job as an executive director. In addition, how we might define what constitutes being "prepared?" Our first inclination is to assume that preparation is about training or experience. Let's look at this angle first and then we'll consider a different perspective on preparation.

At one time, there were no programs for non-profit administration and everyone who took the job for the first-time was essentially untrained. Today, there are far more opportunities for you to take classes, workshops or seminars. You also might be "groomed" for a future leadership transition within the organization. Although both *Daring to Lead* and our Irvine Foundation study respondents indicate that hiring from within is far less prevalent than we think, internal hires made up 55% of the first-time executive directors in the NAMAC survey. Hiring an internal candidate, however, doesn't always mean that the person was groomed specifically to take over the position. Either way, the experiences of those with whom I talked indicated that some wished they'd had more training before taking the job and others who were trained felt that experience became the best teacher of all.

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Paloma Patterson, Executive Director of Malashock Dance, was both an internal hire (she started as the Education Director) and the recipient of a master's degree in non-profit management. But she stated clearly in our interview that there is a distinct difference between theory and practice. All of the class projects she was assigned to learn about creating strategic plans or other such simulation activities, as well as her class discussions about board relations and donor development ultimately had little connection with the actual practice of these activities in the organizational setting. She noted that she was not groomed for the position; she applied for it after much consideration. She never aspired to be an executive director but felt a desire to advance the organization in which she had already made a significant professional investment.

Gabriel Wardell, in his fourth year as Executive Director of Atlanta Film Festival 365, said that in the last three years he's taken many courses at his local non-profit management support center and always comes away with new knowledge. But that he firmly believes "it's a combination of experience and then knowledge. I think that taking a course in executive directorships wouldn't have helped without the experience first." Both he and Patterson feel that having a context for learning is essential. Patterson did acknowledge that the advantage of the master's degree was the confidence it gave her to take on the job and the ability to know how to ask questions or figure things out better than had she not had the training. It's also possible that her master's degree in non-profit management gave her a leg up on candidates without the specific credentials.

Tyler Richard Hewes at Orchestra Nova moved from production manager, in which his daily interactions were with musicians and stagehands, to executive director where he is interacting with donors and board members and negotiating the musicians' union contracts. No longer managing load-in and touring schedules, he's pouring over financial statements and managing a small staff. He did not have previous training and had not taken any workshops prior to his first day on the job. He envies those who have participated in masters programs like Patterson. Entering his third year on the job now, he has learned by doing, read a lot of books, takes every workshop he can, and found a group of mentors who have helped him along the way.

Autumn Labbe-Renault has been the Executive Director at Davis Media Access since 2006. Hired from within, she offered that even though one may have worked in a non-profit before, it doesn't mean that they know the real "ins and outs" of how a non-profit works. She said, "I knew business and education but not non-profit management. Things like bylaws and yearly financial reports, how the board works and what the expectations are were all unclear. Just because I'd worked in a non-profit before didn't mean I knew any of those things."

### **ED 101**

This is not news to Michelle Gislason, Senior Project Manager at CompassPoint Non-Profit Services and Diane Franklin PhD, Principal Consultant with Impact Collaborative. Both have developed training workshops that provide training for first-time executive directors.

Franklin offers "Getting Started: Survival Skills for First-Time Executive Directors," a workshop in which she addresses key areas such as time management, the role of the board versus the role of the staff, financial issues, and even "the loneliness of the CEO". She has also conducted Executive Growth Groups, peer coaching circles in which new executive leaders can talk about

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their experiences with others in similar situations. She commented that through these groups she's seen "a difference in the growth of confidence and knowledge for those who participated."

Gislason, started CompassPoint's "Executive Director 101: Management Training for New Non-Profit Executive Directors" series with consultant and colleague Michael Warr, a former first-time executive director of a cultural organization who was interested in helping people through the lessons he learned. In their workshop, Warr presented stories about some of the challenges he faced as a new executive director and Gislason built on his experience by sharing information with participants about how one could overcome those challenges. Today the course is a regular on the CompassPoint calendar. It is a three-day program with an executive level curriculum of management practices that provides instruction and skills-building exercises for newly promoted executive directors led by leading experts.

I asked Gislason if there were any challenges for arts administrators that may be different than other nonprofit administrators. She noted that one of the challenges for arts administrators in particular is that many come to the work primarily with an artistic background or a passion for the arts but tend to lack management skills, e.g., knowing how to manage finances, fundraising and board development. CompassPoint's ED 101 program focuses on these topics in addition to helping participants learn how to understand their leadership styles, develop professional networks to help stave off the loneliness, and understand one's own role and its relationship to the board's role.

As I talked to focus group participants and interviewees, I found that the issues they identified as most vexing are the same one's that the ED 101 programs address. Generally speaking, the needs of most first-time executive directors are not all that different from one another. Each one may have varying degrees of understanding of what makes an organization succeed and how to do the job, but the stories of their first year on the job are filled with tales of learning how to work with their boards, how to manage their staff and how to manage their time. I will add that these learning curves that don't always end when you move on to future executive director positions.

To complicate matters, everyone with whom I spoke agreed that most young first-time executive directors often start in highly challenged organizational situations. To paraphrase one interviewee, the board of directors of well-managed, financially stable and highly regarded cultural institution would never make a 26-year old novice the executive director. They will hire someone with enough experience to ensure that the organization won't lose its solid footing. But a struggling arts organization with a lesser reputation and without the resources to pay a more competitive wage will likely take a chance on an inexperienced candidate who is willing to accept the lower salary in exchange for the chance to move up the ladder. One focus group's participants acknowledged that someone with more experience might also know the questions to ask before taking the job and choose to opt out of a potentially disastrous situation.

My own first executive director experience might never have happened if I knew how to ask the right questions about the organization's finances. I saw the financial statements but didn't know that they did not explain a large debt to the IRS. Within three months I had closed down a dance studio and moved the administrative office into my one bedroom apartment to stop the financial

hemorrhaging. We solved the debt problems within my first 18-months but I left before my two-year anniversary following an illness brought on by unrelenting work-related stress.

One interviewee with whom I spoke took the job because he was assured by the board that they would provide him with mentoring and tools to help him through his first year. However, he went on to say the “life preserver” they promised never materialized and he spent the first year learning as he went. At one point he stopped expecting help to find him and instead accepted his reality and learned to say “let me find out”. He also admits that he thinks it’s “just good luck that I didn’t do anything egregious.” Today he feels much more confident about his ability to run the organization thanks in part to his persistent efforts to learn both from experience and professional development opportunities.

While its clear that training programs for first-timers once they are in the job provide needed tools for their toolkit, I was unable to identify any workshops for those who are thinking about taking a step up in the future. If being groomed from within in advance of the promotion is not possible and you aspire to be an executive director in the future, how can you prepare yourself? I see a need for workshops that help aspiring directors prepare by teaching them what questions they should ask and what they should know about the organization before they say “yes” to the hiring committee and how to approach their first few months once they are at the helm. For many, ED101 comes only after you’ve been in the organization for a while and some of it could have been helpful on day one.

One interviewee noted that in a conversation with a colleague they agreed that they didn’t know before they took the job what questions an experienced executive director would have asked the hiring committee. He added “... and if we did, we probably wouldn’t have taken the job.”

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When asked in the NAMAC survey of first-time executive directors what they would do differently today to prepare for a new leadership position they said they would:

- Get more background on financial management and oversight;
- Develop board related committee groups earlier;
- Direct people in a motion that I set instead of moving in a direction myself and expecting all to follow;
- Read nonprofit leadership books much sooner than I did--especially related to integrated fundraising and budgetary management;
- Make sure I have a trusted group of advisors sooner and experienced mentors who understand the political issues, both internal and external; and
- Get more support on best practices for employee management; and

- Connect very personally, over the phone or over coffee, not email, with artists and listen to their ideas and thoughts about the direction of the organization. I went directly to other EDs, funders, partners, etc. and took my time meeting with artists. Artists are THE core of our work and their input and engagement is essential to our success.

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### **Executive Prep, the Corporate Way**

Michael Watkins, in his article *Transforming Leaders: Picking the Right Transition Strategy*, notes that “Leaders in transition reflexively rely on the skills and strategies that worked for them in the past; after all, their previous successes are what propelled them to the new opportunity.” As a first-time executive director however, your leadership instincts are most likely based on the skills and strategies you developed in mid-management which may or may not inform those needed for the executive directorship. Watkins goes on to observe that the practice of basing your leadership in the new position on previous experiences is a mistake, suggesting instead that you must gain a deep understanding of the situation at hand and adapt to that reality<sup>1</sup>.

This leads to another perspective on preparedness, one to which Neff and Citrin (2005) give significant space in their discussion of how future CEOs prepare for their transition to the top. I spoke earlier of the luxury of time that many for-profit leaders have to prepare for the new position. Neff and Citrin describe in detail several examples of how corporate leaders took six weeks or more between jobs to focus specifically on fact finding, prioritizing and agenda setting for their new post. To do this they interviewed staff, board members, customers and others to get the lay of the land and to understand the challenges and opportunities they could face when they actually take the reins. They immersed themselves in financial statements and other corporate documents, asking questions and identifying how they would take their first steps. While Neff and Citrin outline an eight-point process for making the best of this transition time, none of the people with whom I spoke that took over for the outgoing executive director of a non-profit arts and culture organization had any time to research every angle of the organization, let alone have time between positions to create an agenda for the first one hundred days.

That said it’s still an idea that is well worth considering for the non-profit sector. In their article *The Non-Profit ED’s First 100 Days*, Oliver Tessier and Ruth McCambridge outline how a new non-profit executive might approach their first three-months on the job. They suggest first getting a clear picture of the financial situation and then spending your first few days listening and learning. They advocate for being patient and flexible, communicative and responsive. They provide a list of “Eleven Questions for a New Leader” which offers insightful queries one might not otherwise consider to help get you started on a stronger foot. They also remind us that “no matter how much information you gather before hand, you’ll likely find surprises that test your mettle in unexpected ways.” (p. 40)

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<sup>1</sup> Methods that may be helpful for developing this insight in your work as a new executive director are found in the cited article by Watkins and referenced at the end of this essay.

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*“The first year for most people is really trial by fire. After the first year I realized that I should have had a mentor. Looking back there are things that I realize I should have done. It would have been great to have had that handbook that says: Week one, make sure you have a mentor. Insist on it. Find it. Make it happen. Maybe have several.”*

*- Donald Harrison, Executive Director of Ann Arbor Film Festival*

### **The Role of Role Models and Mentors**

Almost all of those with whom I spoke talked about the important role that a mentor played for them in their first experiences. Patterson was able to draw on her former professors and faculty members for advice and guidance. She even hired one of them to consult with the organization on board development when she realized that this was a critical need for the company and an area of weakness for her.

For interviewees participating in an executive peer coaching program like NAMAC’s Peer Coaching Telecircles, they found that support from peers can help when a mentor isn’t available. Both Labbe-Renault and Harrison offered that they’d been in the program and found it very helpful. Peer coaching is a great tool both for advice and for peer support that can reduce the feelings of isolation or burnout that often come with being the one in charge. One interviewee noted that early on “he thought he was supposed to take care of everything.” However he learned otherwise and learned to say “Hey I don’t know this yet, let’s figure it out.” When he got together with his peers he found out their lives were very similar and it was “...very helpful.” He agrees with the others who shared that isolation is a major challenge in the first year.

Hewes cited a number of executives in his local arts community with whom he seeks counsel on an ongoing basis. He stated that these are people that he feels comfortable asking “dumb questions”. He also indicated that sometimes role models are good not just for helping you know how it “should” be done, but for providing an alternative view that can be used to practice discernment. He says that he doesn’t always use their advice, but it helps him learn what his leadership or management style is by comparison.

Skye Christensen, Managing Director of Ninth Street Media, remarked at “how lucky I was” to have a mentor in the executive director she replaced. He repositioned himself on the board of directors and was able to mentor her in her first year. Having a mentor in the previous executive director can have both pluses and minuses. On the plus-side, you can turn to someone with corporate memory at times when understanding what came before is helpful for knowing how to take next steps. On the minus-side it might be more challenging to develop your own leadership style and autonomy if you feel you need to “please” your predecessor. When asked about how this dynamic played out for her, Christensen observed “All around it was a good experience. Just the fact that he had been in the exact role [was helpful].” While she recommended having someone who was on staff being available to be a mentor, she also noted that the success of this kind of relationship can highly individual.

One often used executive leadership transition strategy involves enabling the new executive director to continue working with the former executive director in either a mentorship or consultative capacity. While this isn’t always possible or desirable, creating a transition plan that

incorporates working with the former executive director might help make a smoother transition in some instances. Some of the advantages of an ongoing relationship include organizational continuity, the sharing of experience and knowledge from former staff to new staff, and even the possibility of introductory meetings with important funders to ensure their confidence in the transition. If you are the new executive director you might also find drawbacks such as the inability to establish your own leadership style or the inability of the former director to “let go” of their former position. It is important that the former director be able to differentiate between being your mentor and being your boss.<sup>2</sup>

### **Questions of Style and Identity**

Getting to know your leadership style is another part of your learning curve and often one of the more challenging efforts you’ll undertake when moving from a management position to an executive leadership position. For this reason there are numerous leadership style assessment quizzes available online and it is a key element of many leadership training programs including CompassPoint’s Executive Director 101 and NAMAC’s Leadership Institute.

It often takes years for someone to really learn and align with a personal style of leadership. We discussed this topic at length in one of the focus groups, and found that in addition to leadership style identification, an often overlooked issue is the change to your personal and professional identities when you take on that first executive position. It is a combination of knowing how to go about your own leadership and management business as well as how you perceive of yourself and the image you want to project to others. Being the executive director of a cultural organization can put you “in the limelight” in new ways. You’re now the one who welcomes everyone to the annual gala or performs the curtain speech on opening night. Harrison noted that as the face of his non-profit he started to take a new look at how he was dressing. He asked himself, what is my style and do I care if I don’t reflect the organization? Another interviewee acknowledged that “I own suits now and I never owned suits.”

Labbe-Renault talked of the differences she felt with her relationship to the community. In a small town, she found that people would stop her in the supermarket to make comments or ask questions. “My status in the community changed and I was all of the sudden more important. Before you were well known, but people didn’t have the same attachment to you as they do now” she observed.

Christensen was younger than her colleagues and wanted to be taken seriously. She said that early on she was nervous and “it’s hard to project confidence when you’re nervous.” How she dressed helped instill greater confidence at times when she needed it most. While one can be confident in the job, there is a confidence in the social sense that can be more complicated. Several of the interviewees talked about the role of one’s professional wardrobe in shaping an identity and strengthening confidence.

We shouldn’t underestimate the power of a new power position to throw light on questions of identity. Some of it is internal, but some of it can be driven by external perceptions as well.

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<sup>2</sup> There are several examples of leadership transitions that involved this type of continued relationship in Deborah Ott’s *About Face: A Guide to Founder Transition*.

Christensen and Patterson both had concerns about either being or appearing younger and wanting to be taken seriously. If you are moving up within your organization you are not only having this internal conversation, but you might also be experiencing external changes in the perceptions of your staff members. Most likely your previous relationships were peer to peer. Now you are supervisor to report. Managing this internal/external shift in relationships can be difficult. In our survey of arts administrators for The James Irvine Foundation we found that a very small percentage of the respondents indicated that one of the things that would stop them from taking on greater leadership responsibility is that it “would require changing my relationship with my peers.”

### **Internal vs. External Hires**

Earlier I noted that Patterson, Christensen and Labbe-Renault were internal hires. As each of them would attest, knowing the organization from a support staff position and knowing how to lead and manage it are different things. There are advantages and disadvantages to being either an internal or an external hire. Also referred to as “insider” or “outsider,” each comes with its own pros and cons. If you are an insider you may know the staff and the politics, but could also have more trouble making change happen as well as having people see you in a different role. Patterson sometimes felt the discomfort of managing a staff person that was formerly her peer. There may also be resentment from some about your promotion. Neff and Citrin (p. 60) identify several ways to help “neutralize resentment” which includes asking former colleagues straightforward questions such as:

- What should I be thinking about that I wasn’t thinking about when I was in my previous position?
- What should I know that I might not have known before?
- What’s on your mind?
- What would you like the new Executive Director to be doing?

Asking these questions help you forge new relationships with former colleagues while providing additional insight into the organization’s needs.

Board members may also have a hard time seeing you holding greater authority. Furthermore, as an internal hire you may have a harder time seeing the organization and its needs objectively, continuing old behaviors that may need adjustments in order to further growth. An external hire has the ability to see things from an outsider’s perspective and may have a better chance of making change. Wardell noted that as an outsider he identified several areas of the organization’s operations that had become victim to “always having done it that way.” He also cautions that it isn’t always easy to make needed change even if you’re from the outside.

As an external hire you can ask “dumb” questions which can be used to gather more information. In addition as an outsider you may be more likely to ask *why* questions; as in “why has the organization always outsourced its marketing?” The *why* questions help you dig deeper into the organizational culture which can lead to making needed changes or setting new direction. (Neff and Citrin, p. 43). Ultimately, internal and external hires each have their own challenges and opportunities. The real test is your ability as a new hire to set an agenda that is forged in part

through a period of listening and learning about the organization in the most effective way for you.

### **Board Relations**

Any conversation about becoming a new executive director would be incomplete without a look at the nature of the relationship between the board of directors and the new executive director. Let's be honest, even the most seasoned executive directors can have difficulty navigating this relationship. Several of my dialogues with first-timers were dominated by illustrations of this concern. Like many first-timers, Patterson identified this as one of her weaknesses and brought in a consultant to assist her. The consultant, a former professor, is helping her not only develop the board, but also coaching her on how to productively manage her relationship with them as well.

Gislason and Franklin both devote significant time in their executive director training programs to board issues. CompassPoint holds retreats for executive directors and their board chairs at which they talk about mutual expectations for one another. She finds that they can be very enlightening because they are opportunities for honest communication about what the executive director thinks the board wants from them and what the board really wants from the executive director. Often she says the lack of alignment between these expectations is the cause of executive director turnover in organizations. Gislason's found that many of their requests for executive coaching come from board chairs who want their new executive director to be coached. Many times the board feels that the new executive director should step into their authority more and own their position. Similarly, new executive directors want to be able to do this as well and know that they aren't overstepping their boundaries. In my discussions with new executive directors I heard them say that working with a board for the first-time does raise issues of knowing the appropriate boundaries, fully accepting and implementing their newly acquired leadership responsibility and each party knowing their roles. Furthermore, board members who were used to working with a different executive leadership style may have difficulty transitioning to a new style – one that you may be trying on for the first-time. Questions that arose for my interviewees included:

- When the board has just hired you, how do you implement your vision if you find that it differs from theirs?
- How much do you push for change?
- What can you change alone and what does the board need to approve?

There is no silver bullet for knowing how to manage this - one of the most complicated aspects of non-profit management. Even Michael Kaiser had board trouble. Many choose not to take the top job because it means spending significant time in board management. One person when asked if they would consider taking another executive director position in the future said "It totally depends. The circumstances would have to be different." He went on to talk about how a model could be created that didn't require a board of directors.

### **Final Thoughts**

I recently heard actress Hilary Swank say in an interview that she knew she wanted a role when reading the script "scared her." Trying anything new and challenging can be scary or pose some

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kind of risk - risk of failure, risk of being or doing something wrong, risk of stepping outside your comfort zone or risk of not knowing what to do at all. Each of the first-time executive directors with whom I spoke had some sense of uncertainty with their acceptance of the job. I heard several comments from first-timers that they felt the risk of holding the entire organization's fate on their shoulders; one observed that "screwing up your own life is one thing but screwing up other people's is a heavy burden to bear."

While all of the fears of risk and screwing it up are very human responses to something new and challenging, I believe that there are truly rewards for taking on the challenge of leading a nonprofit arts and culture organization. Swank knew to reframe her fear and accept a challenging role. A colleague of mine once referred to that flurry of butterflies we both felt going into a challenging interview with a potential client as the reminder that "something good was about to happen." So how do you feel the fear and do it anyway? How do you reframe the challenges into opportunities for a new adventure? There are a few things I learned about thriving as a first-timer through my interviews and research for this essay.

First, when you come right down to it, every new director is different as is every organization that hires them. Much of what I've learned through my conversations with first-time executive directors, reading "the experts" and talking with leadership development consultants is that while these differences exist there are also commonalities in the overall experience that can be shared. Finding people with whom you can share the challenges, excitement, gains in self-knowledge and successes can be immensely affirming as well as educational.

Second, you can gain a sense of control over the unknown by finding a means through which you can organize your approach, such as:

- Creating an agenda for the first 100 days;
- Preparing through a process of deep inquiry;
- Gathering your internal and/or external support systems;
- Reading up on the latest leadership best-sellers;
- Signing up for Executive Directors Bootcamp; or
- Identifying a mentor.

Third, always remember that in your lifetime you have had and will continue to have many "first 100 days" and many first time experiences.

Fourth, enjoy getting to know your personal leadership style. This is a great opportunity for self-reflection and change that you can carry with you throughout your career.

Fifth, look upon your new board of directors as supporters of the mission and goals of the organization and your allies in the productive and effective achievement of those ends.

In our research for The James Irvine Foundation we asked people what appealed to them about taking on greater leadership responsibility at their current or another organization. Sixty-four percent strongly agreed that "The opportunity to have a greater impact" appealed to them. In the end, choosing a career in the nonprofit arena is about mission-driven work that has an impact on

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the public beyond the bottom line. As a new executive director you are in charge of leading that effort in partnership with your board and staff. The beautiful reward comes when you watch the curtain go up with a full house, or the smile on a student's face when they learn a new dance step, or the crowd of people on the opening night of a film festival you led for the first-time. I guarantee when that moment happens, you'll wonder why you didn't taken that executive directorship a lot sooner.

===== [sidebar 2]=====

Here are a few more tips straight from your first-timer colleagues to help you out:

- Work early to develop a good relationship with your board.
- Trust your instincts.
- Find mentor. Maybe, find several.
- Have the confidence to ask for help when you need it. Be able to say early on "I don't know, but I'm willing to figure it out."
- Work to reduce isolation by reaching out to other executive directors in your community, joining peer coaching circles or other means of social networking.
- Take time in the first-year to work on relationship building and defining roles. Develop strategic plans in year two.
- Don't feel pressured to make change right away.
- Allow yourself time to develop.
- Be ready to listen and learn.
- Identify ways to seek work-life balance and make it a priority.
- Make the time for professional development.
- Be willing to say "I'm sorry" and "thank you," a lot.

## **Interviewees**

Skye Christensen, Interim Managing Director, Ninth Street Independent Film Center  
Diane Franklin, Principal, Impact Collaborative  
Michelle Gislason, Senior Project Manager, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services  
Donald Harrison, Executive Director, Ann Arbor Film Festival  
Tyler Richard Hewes, Executive Director, Orchestra Nova  
Autumn Labbe-Renault, Executive Director, David Media Access  
Paloma Patterson, Executive Director, Malashock Dance  
Gabriel Wardell, Executive Director, Atlanta Film Festival 365

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### **Victoria J Saunders Bio**

Victoria J Saunders is an independent arts consultant. With a Masters Degree in Arts Administration from the University of Oregon and more than twenty years experience, Saunders' practice assists local arts organizations, philanthropic foundations, community initiatives and the local arts agency with a range of services in arts management. She has led or managed small and mid-sized arts organizations in addition to spending seven years in various capacities with the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture. There she began the first Emerging Leaders of Arts and Culture program in San Diego in an effort to strengthen and support the next generation of arts leaders. With a passion for research and writing and a deep interest in arts leadership, she has published several articles on next generation and mid-career arts leadership for CultureWork, an electronic publication of the University of Oregon Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy, as well as conducted statewide leadership research for The James Irvine Foundation. A tireless arts education advocate, she is a member of the Arts Education Council at Americans for the Arts. Her clients include Illinois Arts Alliance, City of San Diego Commission for Art and Culture, Media Arts Center San Diego, San José Office of Cultural Affairs, California Alliance for Arts Education and the San Diego Unified School District.

