

New Leaders in Arts Organizations

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Dedicated to my husband.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **Literature Review**

Although there is growing literature on leadership succession planning for the arts, the field of Arts Administration lacks substantial research on the subject, especially that addressing issues of becoming a new executive-level leader for an arts organization. How do executive level leaders prepare for entering leadership positions in arts organizations?

After developing concrete questions to support my proposed question, I interviewed six of today's newest executive level leaders in the arts administration field. I found first hand examples of methods used by them as they approached their new roles in arts organizations.

Not only do I believe that my findings will benefit executive level leaders in the arts administration field, but also the rising leader; and will provide a starting point for the arts administrators for continued research.

After careful review of my interview content, I have come to the conclusion that the six executive level leaders I interviewed had similar approaches when entering their leadership positions in arts organizations.

The method used to conduct my research was establishing the candidates to interview, developing interview questions, and conducting “in person” interviews. I interviewed six leaders, each in executive level positions at arts organizations, using the following interview questions below.

**Interview Questions:**

- 1.) How long have you been in this position?
- 2.) How did you prepare yourself for this position?
- 3.) What strategies did you use?
- 4.) What did you do in preparation before formally beginning your position?
- 5.) Were resources made available to you by the board? by senior staff?
- 6.) Did you access resources? if so what types of resources?
- 7.) Was the position or situation as you expected? How so?
- 8.) How did you implement your vision/agenda (setting your stage)?
- 9.) How are you maintaining your vision?
- 10.) Is there anything you wish you had been better prepared for or known prior to starting your leadership position?
- 11.) Is there anything you would like to add? Any advice for leaders out there who may be preparing to enter a leadership position at an arts organization that you would like to share?

## **Expected findings**

My expected findings will help new nonprofit arts leaders, as well as leaders in transition, by providing a model that will support their transition and entrance into arts organizations. The supporting research and information will be examined and I expect to produce leadership change techniques, successful processes, and a helpful guide to and for the next generation of new leaders in arts organization in Philadelphia and other urban settings.

## **Literature and Background**

My primary research will consist of six live interviews with executive level leaders. I found little published work that focused directly to new leaders' approaches to preparing for new executive leadership positions. "Leadership Transitions: The New College President" by Judith Block Mcloughlin addresses the issues and dilemmas new presidents encounter, and offers advice based on research and first hand experience. This book is very thorough in providing scenarios that a new college president may face, such as leadership transition, but it does not provide a clear approach or suggested techniques that support the new leader in preparing for their new role in an organization. Additional sources, such as Michael Watkins', *The First 90 Days, Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels*, Charlotte Roberts' article entitled, *Leadership As Art, Nation's Cities*, and John Brothers' blog entry, "*Transition Matters.*" *Couch Cushion Change*, also did not yield direct information.

## **Procedure**

Data was gathered by interviewing executive level leaders in arts organizations. Responses to interview questions are analyzed and examined to share methods and leadership approaches. I will be conducting qualitative research, which will support the examination, analysis and interpretation of observations, interview content, and the process of being a new leader. I will analyze each interview and focus on the approaches and process used by each leader. I will examine the outcomes of each interview and analyze what techniques, preparation methods, strategies, and resources were used by each leader when entering a new leadership role.

The population for my research will consist of presidents, executive directors, and directors for the following organizations: University of the Arts, Fleisher, Chamber Orchestra, Kimmel Center, Opera Company of Philadelphia, Arts and Cultural Office of Philadelphia.

## **Limitations of the Study**

This study attempts to discover the approaches and techniques amongst some of Philadelphia's newest executive level leaders in arts organizations. I believe I will have a great deal of primary research at my fingertips and my



findings will be applicable not only to executive level leaders but to anyone entering a new job, arts or not.

## **Body of the Thesis**

Interview #1

### **David Devan, Executive Director of the Opera Company of Philadelphia**

David B. Devan arrived at the Opera Company of Philadelphia in January 2006 following an extensive North American search spearheaded by Artistic Director Robert B. Driver to identify a managing director to oversee all income-generating departments as well as board development and community programs. In March 2009, the Opera Company Board of Directors unanimously supported his appointment as Executive Director.

Since his arrival, Mr. Devan has worked closely with board and administration on strategic planning initiatives and building partnerships within the community. Key achievements born out of these initiatives have included the first cycle of the education department's *Hip H'Opera* collaboration with Arts Sanctuary's after-school program; the successful partnership between the Opera Company, Curtis Institute of Music and Kimmel Center Presents to produce a fully-staged opera each season at the Perelman Theater with joint marketing strength; OCP's

selection for a Wallace Foundation Excellence Award to support marketing programs; and a \$5 million fundraising campaign supporting the company's artistic goals, of which \$4.1M has been raised in a most difficult economic climate.

Mr. Devan came to Philadelphia from Pacific Opera Victoria, where he held the position of Executive Director from 1997 through 2005. During his tenure at Pacific Opera Victoria the company's budget increased by 150%. His accomplishments include maintaining accumulated surpluses and increasing the company's annual giving more than threefold; establishing a successful endowment campaign strategy; and achieving strong subscription sales while pursuing an artistically-innovating program.

Prior to his work with Pacific Opera Victoria, Mr. Devan spent four years as the Director of Marketing and Development for Opera Ontario; worked as the Performing Arts Marketing Head for the Harbourfront Centre; and served for three seasons as Marketing Director for the Canadian Opera Company. He has served on the Board of Directors for Opera America and as Chairman of the Board for Opera CA (Canada), the national associations for opera companies. He has also previously held leadership positions with the Pro Art Alliance of Greater Victoria, and Arts Action BC, two groups focused on advocacy and government funding for the arts. A native of Canada, Mr. Devan attended Brock University in Ontario and Stanford's University's Graduate School of Business Executive Program.

1. How long have you been in this position? March 2009
2. How did you prepare yourself for this position? I did nothing on the fly and was up front about my skills. I knew my strengths very very well. I knew that a strategic overall and plan was needed and that is strength of mine. I found a way to discuss what is truly strategic and tactically. 5 years from, evolutionary steps, really about fit  
basement of skills and find place that needed them
3. What strategies did you use? Competition- sustainable competitive, influence vs. market share, HBO of opera world research apply, facts, art, fit, leadership  
search process should not be such a secret, leadership variable, candidates full access
4. What did you do in preparation before formally beginning your position? Tools-management tools, tool box, executive coaching relationship, 4 different 360 degree review, leadership style visiting
5. Were resources made available to you by the board? by senior staff?  
Yes, by the board and staff.
6. Did you access resources? if so what types of resources? Since I was already working here as the Managing Director, resources were readily available. Audits, prior strategic plans, and the minutes.

7. Was the position or situation as you expected? How so? Yes and no things that were busted, challenge, good crisis- didn't go to waste, came out stronger
8. How did you implement your vision/agenda (setting your stage)? .)  
Made sure the vision wasn't just mine everyone on same strategic plan  
lots of revisions competing fuctions
9. How are you maintaining your vision? 3 years- org process, finding the sweet spot with the board, trust on both sides, CEO doesn't trust the board
10. Is there anything you wish you had been better prepared for or known prior to starting your position as President? You can't be prepared for everything but having a toolbox full of the right tools and knowing how to use them is best thing you can do.
11. Is there anything you would like to add? Any advice for leaders out there who may be preparing to enter a leadership position at an arts organization that you would like to share? It truly comes down to fit and dialogue.

Interview #2

**Peter H. Gistlenlick, Executive Director at the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia.**

Peter began his tenure at the Chamber in September 2006 and serves as chief administrative officer responsible for managing human, financial, and physical resources of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia. With an operating budget of 2.2 million dollars, supervise and manage 33 musicians and 12 staff members. Work in partnership with the Music Director; report to the Board of Directors and work closely with the President and the Board's Executive Committee. Additional responsibilities include fundraising, sponsorships, public relations, board relations, international touring, special projects, marketing and media management.

1. How long have you been in this position? Since September 2006
2. How did you prepare yourself for this position?
3. What strategies did you use? Financial Transparency, Detailed budgeting, monthly cash flow reporting, analyzing the organization and retention rates of subscriptions, and know that the Music Director and ED must get along. Along with understanding that there is no identity with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Chamber Orchestra anymore.
4. What did you do in preparation before formally beginning your position? The study of the 990 was the biggest preparation. The organization was in a financial crisis.

5. Were resources made available to you by the board? by senior staff?  
Yes
6. Did you access resources? if so what types of resources? I had requested the 990's of the last 3 years.
7. Was the position or situation as you expected? How so? Yes, In my review of the 990's from the past 3 years I knew what challenges I had ahead. I had to approach this very carefully.
8. How did you implement your vision/agenda (setting your stage)?  
Believe in the product, have a 6-month strategic plan, and get financial organized.
9. How are you maintaining your vision? Implementing a long-term strategic plan. The hardest was maintaining my vision and strategy with the musicians.
10. Is there anything you wish you had been better prepared for or known prior to starting your position as President? Know what you want to do prior to starting.
11. Is there anything you would like to add? Any advice for leaders out there who may be preparing to enter a leadership position at an arts organization that you would like to share? Make sure it is in agreement with your own conscience. Be diplomatic, honest to yourself and to others. Make well thought out decisions for the organization.

### Interview #3

#### **Matt Braun, Executive Director of the Fleisher Art Memorial**

Matthew Braun is the Executive Director of the Fleisher Art Memorial. Having entered the museum field by way of the fine arts, Braun studied sculpture at Washington University's School of Art in St. Louis, and then went on as a Fulbright Scholar to pursue post-graduate studies at the Slade School of Art at the University of London. These early studio art experiences, including residency at the International Studio Program at the P.S.1/MOMA Contemporary Art Center in New York, propelled him into the world of exhibit design and on to Curator of Exhibitions for the National Park Service at St. Louis's Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (a.k.a. the Gateway Arch). Upon relocating to Ithaca, New York in 1997, he began his tenure with The History Center as curator, and was selected to serve as its Executive Director in 2000.

In 2005, Mr. Braun was honored by the American Association of Museums with the Nancy Hanks Memorial Award for Professional Excellence. He was subsequently selected to participate in the renowned Getty Leadership Institute, held annually at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. Mr. Braun has served the field in many capacities, as a conference presenter and peer reviewer for the Institute for Museum and Library Services, American Association of Museums, National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the

Pennsylvania Council for the Arts, the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, the American Association for State and Local History, and the Museum Association of New York. He currently is serving as a lead partner in the Arts for Children and Youth Initiative, a ten-year effort to reform arts-based learning in Philadelphia's school system.

1. How long have you been in this position? January 2007 – Present
2. How did you prepare yourself for this position? I did read the 1<sup>st</sup> 90 days. I also did a lot of research on the organization and myself. Really understanding what I saw as my strengths.
3. What strategies did you use? Early wins. When you walk into an organization that for some time has not had many wins or may need a few moral boosts you need those early wins. An example would be a fresh coat of paint or some new chairs. Some of those necessities that have not been granted in over 15 years can really start you off on the right personnel foot.
4. What did you do in preparation before formally beginning your position? I researched the organization, requested the last 3 years of the 990's, meeting minutes, and collateral materials. The meeting minutes were extremely helpful in understanding a bit of the culture of the organization and what I might be walking into.
5. Were resources made available to you by the board? by senior staff? Yes, by both. I also requested to meet with specific people. I wanted to



- meet with the Director of Education, the Development Director, and a few other key individuals.
6. Did you access resources? if so what types of resources? Yes, I did. Documents and meeting with specific people. I visited a few times. I wanted to know that this was not only the right fit for me but for the organization and the people it served.
  7. Was the position or situation as you expected? How so? Yes and No. There are always the curve balls but that is to be expected. I had asked for the current org chart and the one I was given was hand written. I was not expecting that. But in every challenge there is an opportunity.
  8. How did you implement your vision/agenda (setting your stage)? I involved people and the process. I lead and they lead. It is a give and take.
  9. How are you maintaining your vision? We are moving forward with changes and organizational developments a new org chart and we are working on a strategic plan.
  10. Is there anything you wish you had been better prepared for or known prior to starting your position as President? I would have liked to have had my network established more prior to my move here but that might have been difficult.

11. Is there anything you would like to add? Any advice for leaders out there who may be preparing to enter a leadership position at an arts organization that you would like to share? Visit the organization as much as possible, meet with people, board members, and people in positions that you will interact with the most prior to accepting the job. This is how you find the fit.

Interview #4

**Anne Ewers, President & CEO of Kimmel Center, Inc.**

In July, 2007 Anne Ewers assumed the role of President & CEO of Kimmel Center, Inc. The \$35 million organization owns and operates the Kimmel Center and manages the Academy of Music, homes to eight resident companies. Additionally, KCI assumed the management of the University of the Arts' Merriam Theater in August, 2009.

In her inaugural year with the Center, the company retired its \$30 million construction debt, raised the endowment from \$40 million to \$72 million, garnered \$10 million to establish an annual city-wide festival and closed the 2007/08 fiscal year with a \$1.2 million surplus to be directed to capital improvements.

Anne Ewers became President & CEO of Utah Symphony & Opera in July 2002 following the merger of the two performing arts organizations. During her

tenure, she doubled the organization's endowment from \$18 million to \$36 million, turned a structural deficit of \$1.8 million into a \$360,000 surplus, founded the Deer Valley Music Festival which generates \$1.9 million annually, launched the symphony on its first European tour in 19 years netting \$850,000 and recorded the symphony's first CD in 15 years.

From 1991-2002, she was General Director of Utah Opera. She successfully increased the Opera's budget from \$1.5 million to \$5 million, grew the subscription base by 20 percent, expanded the seasonal repertoire from three to four main stage productions and surpassed two capital campaign goals raising more than \$8 million.

Prior to joining Utah Opera, Ms. Ewers' positions included General Director of Boston Lyric Opera from 1984-1989 where she retired a \$450,000 deficit, built an endowment fund and added two main stage productions. From 1979-1981 she was an assistant stage director at San Francisco Opera.

An accomplished opera stage director, Ms. Ewers' most recent stage productions include Kurt Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petite Bourgeoisie* in 2002-03 and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* in 2004-05. Both were directed for Utah Symphony & Opera. She made her main stage debut with the San Francisco

Opera in 1988-89 directing *La Gioconda*. Other artistic highlights include her direction of Wagner's *Ring* performed in Boston and New York for Boston Lyric Opera as well as the direction of more than 60 other opera productions over the course of her career.

Active in her community and in several professional organizations, Ms. Ewers is a board member of The Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau and on the board of advisors for Opera Boston and Organic Theatre Company (Chicago). She is also a frequent panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts.

Ms. Ewers holds both a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and Bachelor of Music from Fontbonne College (1974) and a Master of Music in Opera Production from the University of Texas at Austin (1977).

1. How long have you been in this position? July 2007
2. How did you prepare yourself for this position? A lot of mentors on the job. I also worked with a consulting firm that also specializing in executive training.
3. What strategies did you use? My fundraising skills, outside resources, mentors, and understanding that each job can be treated as a performance. You want to have a fantastic performance everyday.

4. What did you do in preparation before formally beginning your position? I made sure that I understood the community and how it works not just the community here at the Kimmel but the Philadelphia community at large and specifically the philanthropic community, the political community, and the arts and culture community.
5. Were resources made available to you by the board? by senior staff?  
Yes.
6. Did you access resources? if so what types of resources? I mostly met with senior staff, board members, and few donors. I did look at financial records.
7. Was the position or situation as you expected? How so? Yes and No.
8. How did you implement your vision/agenda (setting your stage)? By knowing the community in the organization. Having a daily presence in the halls even is so important in being part of your organizations community and that is a really simple thing.
9. How are you maintaining your vision? By being honest and transparent about the challenges and strengths of the organization and including everyone. Everyone who works here has stock in the success.
10. Is there anything you wish you had been better prepared for or known prior to starting your position as President? More thorough review of

the financial statements and cash flow but we'll get there. We have an amazing senior staff and I am grateful.

11. Is there anything you would like to add? Any advice for leaders out there who may be preparing to enter a leadership position at an arts organization that you would like to share? I found meeting with senior level staff members, board members, and donors provided me with the most incite and candid information about the organization. I also had meetings such as these on multiple occasions. I do recommend or advise visiting and meeting many times in order to truly know if a place is the best fit for you and you for them.

#### Interview #5

#### **Sean Buffington, President/CEO, The University of the Arts**

The institution's third president since it attained university status in 1987, Buffington began his tenure at The University of the Arts on August 15, 2007.

Previously, Mr. Buffington was Harvard's Associate Provost for Arts and Culture and Director of Cultural Programs, where he oversaw arts activities and planning for the cultural elements of Harvard's new campus in Allston, Massachusetts. As the University's principal representative to arts and cultural institutions in the Boston region, Mr. Buffington was responsible for Harvard's

Tony-award winning American Repertory Theatre; the Harvard University Art Museums; and Villa I Tatti, Harvard's Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.

Prior to relocating from Boston to Philadelphia, Mr. Buffington served on the boards of the Passim Music Center, The Open Gate Foundation and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. He currently serves on the board of the Philadelphia Art Commission.

1. How long have you been in this position? August 2007
2. How did you prepare yourself for this position? I was approached for this position and really was not expecting for it to unfold the way it did. I reviewed the website thoroughly and had printed materials sent my way. I did request a copy of the strategic plan, the last 3 years of the 990's, and an admission packet.
3. What strategies did you use? My strategy was to peel back the layers during the interview process. I wanted to find out what the biggest challenges would be.
4. What did you do in preparation before formally beginning your position? I visited, met with members of the board multiple times over the summer, faculty, and members of the cabinet.
5. Were resources made available to you by the board? by senior staff?

Yes

6. Did you access resources? if so what types of resources? Yes, collateral materials and financial documents. We are very different from the small shop and intern has politics that you will not come across at a non-academic setting. Though we are a main source of the arts, artists, and arts related resource for many in the city and a part of the arts and culture community and community at large we are not an arts and culture organization.
7. Was the position or situation as you expected? How so? Yes and No. Yes, because I knew a strategic plan was greatly needed and that the financial status of the institution was not in the shape that many thought it was in. No, because I did not realize to the extent that the faculty felt under valued and also felt that the staff received all of the praise.
8. How did you implement your vision/agenda (setting your stage)? I began by taking the focus off of both faculty and staff and put the focus on the students. I held open office ours for students every week. I wanted this to be a reset button
9. How are you maintaining your vision? Developing stronger relationships with the faculty and senior staff, and especially the Trustees. I have also found it helpful to have a core group of colleagues to discuss ideas with.



10. Is there anything you wish you had been better prepared for or known prior to starting your position as President? This is a lonely job. It is very different from being a provost at Harvard. Being a young president, there is an additional set of challenges. Those are challenges that you must not let get in the way of the job.

11. Is there anything you would like to add? Any advice for leaders out there who may be preparing to enter a leadership position at an arts organization that you would like to share? I would recommend multiple visits prior to the start date of a new position and I would also recommend that during the interview process.

Interview #6

**Gary Steuer, Chief Cultural Officer, City of Philadelphia**

Gary P. Steuer began serving on October 1st, 2008 as Chief Cultural Officer for the City of Philadelphia, directing the newly created Office of Arts Culture and the Creative Economy, appointed by Mayor Michael Nutter. Prior to that he served as Vice President for Private Sector Affairs at Americans for the Arts, the national service organization for local arts agencies. He also had the additional title of Executive Director of the Arts & Business Council of Americans for the Arts. He

was responsible for leading efforts to stimulate more private sector support for the arts, including promoting partnership between the arts and business, as well as overseeing services to the national network of Arts & Business Councils, Business Committee for the Arts affiliates and United Arts Funds. He also managed strategic partnerships with such organizations as The Conference Board, Council on Foundations, Independent Sector and Grantmakers in the Arts. He served as president and CEO of the Arts & Business Council from 1996 to 2005, when the Council merged its operations with Americans for the Arts. From 1993 to 1996, Gary was director of New York programs for the Council. Under his leadership the Council's budget grew by more than 400 percent and included the creation of such programs as the National Arts Marketing Project, with a total of over \$5 million in support from American Express to date; the Met Life Foundation National Arts Forums; and the New York State Cultural Tourism Initiative.

Earlier in his career he was Executive Director of National Actors Theatre on Broadway, Director of the Capital Funding Initiative of the New York State Council on the Arts, Managing Director of the Vineyard Theatre, Director of Programs for the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York, an aide to a United States Congressman, and a commercial theatre producer. Gary has written, lectured, and taught extensively on arts management and policy issues. He has served on many boards of directors, and funding and advisory panels for local, statewide, and national organizations.

1. How long have you been in this position? October 2008
2. How did you prepare yourself for this position? I spent as much time here, in Philadelphia as possible. In addition, I started working prior to my actual start date, really. This was my choice. Even without an official email address, I wanted to get my hands in and start building relationships.
3. What strategies did you use? Starting as soon as I was offered the position. Introducing myself and becoming part of the city as quickly as I could. This helped establish a place for me and the office prior to my actual arrival.
4. What did you do in preparation before formally beginning your position? Research on Philadelphia, spent more time here, built my network, and built relationships.
5. Were resources made available to you by the board? by senior staff?  
Yes
6. Did you access resources? if so what types of resources? Yes, I reviewed former plans and new plans.
7. Was the position or situation as you expected? How so? Yes and No.
8. How did you implement your vision/agenda (setting your stage)? My vision and agenda has changed over time since being here. Once

- arriving, we hit an economic downturn so the plans that I had did change a bit.
9. How are you maintaining your vision? Keeping a clear channel of communication with the Mayor and the public. Having the people best interest and always reaching out to my peers for guidance.
  10. Is there anything you wish you had been better prepared for or known prior to starting your position as President? The recession
  11. Is there anything you would like to add? Any advice for leaders out there who may be preparing to enter a leadership position at an arts organization that you would like to share? As soon as you are officially offered a position, jump in and start building relationships.

## **Conclusion**

After compiling and analyzing the responses from my interview questions, I have concluded that each of the executive level leaders, I met with, prepare for their new positions in arts organizations using similar techniques, preparation methods, strategies, and resources. I have outlined below, in five steps, showing how executive level leaders prepare for their new positions in arts organizations. These steps are highlights that show the similarities in approach when preparing for a new position.

### **Step 1: Thorough review of documents**

Leaders prepared by reviewing financial documentations, 990's, collateral materials, web content, and two out of the six went through executive level coaching.

### **Step 2: Develop strategies, ideas, and preliminary plans.**

After reviewing these documents the leaders developed strategies and preliminary plans during and after the interview process. By doing so, it helped each leader to recognize and prepare for the areas in the organization that needed strengthening. Each leader recommended that having a plan in place prior to starting was extremely important to the organizations health and his or her own. One leader shared that his biggest regret was not having a more solid plan in place prior to starting.

### **Step 3: Meet with key players and visit multiple times, build relationships, and continue to develop your plan.**

Leaders prepare by asking for more internal resources once beginning the interview process such as meeting with senior staff, board members, reviewing financial documentations other than 990's, meeting with direct reports, meeting with donors, and reviewing meeting minutes.

**Step 4: Recognize early wins; continue to develop strategies, ideas, and preliminary plans, build relationships.**

One leader simply gave the halls of the building a paint job and the staff, faculty, and student moral improved in no time.

This established a rapport with the community, very quickly. The leader was able to recognize an early win not only to establish himself as a leader but also to do something good for his community.

**Step 5: Upon acceptance, visit and meet with people multiple times, build relationships, continue to develop your plan and be ready to implement.**

The common techniques applied by those I interviewed, was to implement a strategic plan using much of what was learned during the interview process as a starting point for this planning process. An important part of implementing this plan or vision is making sure that it's not a one-person plan. The organizations community must be involved in the process and the leader must believe in the product, completely. It is also important for the leader to be flexible with his or her agenda and to consider new ideas.

Regardless of how much you prepare or how you prepare it is important to know that through my interviews it was made clear that you can't be prepared for everything. "You can't be prepared for everything but having a toolbox full of the

right tools and knowing how to use them is best thing you can do.” David Devan

For those preparing for that leadership position in an arts organization or for anyone starting that new job, remember, “ be in agreement with your conscience, be honest, and make decisions carefully. This will help with your search for finding the best place to land. “ Peter Gistenlick

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