

# Involving Youth in the Arts Project

Phase II – Focus Groups on Next Generation Leadership

## *Executive Summary*

Commissioned by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

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*Next Generation Arts Leaders at the San Francisco Bay Area Emerging Arts Professionals “Evolve and Vocalize” event. April 11, 2009, SOMARTS, San Francisco. Photo by Kari Orvik.*

## INTRODUCTION

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Two years ago we commissioned and presented a report on “Involving Youth in Non Profit Arts Organization” that illustrated how the recruitment and retention of the next generation’s “best and brightest” was critical to the future of all nonprofit arts organizations. Although the political and economic landscape has changed dramatically since then, the thesis that the future vitality of arts organizations requires the engagement of exceptionally talented and motivated young people is no less true today.

In this follow-up report, “Involving Youth in the Arts Project Phase II – Focus Groups on Next Generation Leadership,” we convened 50 emerging, mid-career and established administrators from a wide range of arts organizations to put forward their ideas about how that engagement can work better.

Some of the key findings are ones we may have long known but have rarely called out:

- There are entrepreneurial souls working for organizations with good ideas that never get heard, much less acted on.
- There are passionate young people with the desire and skills to take on crucial assignments that never get asked.
- There are too many potential leaders who get handed responsibility for achieving results but not the training to do a good job, nor the trust to make important decisions.

Some other findings are more nuanced and compel us to think more deeply about our professional practice no matter the size, type or mission of our particular organization or our role within it.

*While a life in and around the arts may always attract great talent, the lack of professional development opportunities, of a support network, of constructive reviews on job performance, of guidance on how to map out a career path and, all too often, miscommunication between colleagues of different generations (on top of the chronic undercompensation that permeates the nonprofit sector) makes retaining such talent extremely difficult.*

What we learned in conducting the research that informs this report is that deriving intelligent responses to these findings requires the active involvement of those who have been in the field the longest as well as those who have just arrived (and everyone in between). Some of this report’s recommendations about how to inspire staff at all levels to be more invested in the organization’s success are simple and inexpensive. Others will require deeper investments of money, of time, and of trust.

Whether you are leading an organization or have just been hired to your first job in the sector we hope that this report will encourage you to adopt recommendations and engage your peers, staff and friends in the field to adapt them to your circumstances and innovate as you go. The innovation, as we learned from focus group participants, is already happening and to share your experiences and ideas on the topic please join in on the discussions already in progress online here:

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=42171556599>

We look forward to hearing more in real time and online about your efforts on this important issue.

Moy Eng  
Program Director, Performing Arts  
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

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### **BACKGROUND:**

Every organization in every sector has to attract new people to its ranks if it wants to survive. Over time, one generation transitions out to make room for the next generation. Increasingly, we have as many as four different generations working side by side in our organizations, and the intersections of those generations is changing the dynamics of what we do and how we do it. This report is on Phase II of the INVOLVING YOUTH IN NONPROFIT ARTS ORGANIZATIONS initiative of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation – designed to attempt to better understand those dynamics.

Phase I of the Project:: 1) mapped existing efforts to involve youth in California Arts organizations in five areas: (i) as paid administrators, (ii) volunteers, (iii) financial supporters, (iv) advocates and (v) audiences; 2) identified existing successful programs that could serve as potential replicable models, 3) compared and contrasted the efforts of the nonprofit arts and environmental fields to involve young people; 4) made easy and virtually cost-free recommendations to arts organizations that would move them to greater youth involvement, and 5) via wide dissemination of the Report, coupled with a tour of Town Hall meetings in California to present the findings, sought to raise sector wide awareness of, and appreciation for, generational challenges.

### **CURRENT PROJECT PHASE II OBJECTIVES:**

The current Phase II of the Project was centered on exploring what members of different generations (Millennials, Generation Xers and Baby Boomers, in that order) thought about arts administration as a career path, and to identify the obstacles, barriers, challenges, and the assets and opportunities in recruiting, retaining and managing different generations within our workforce.

The three principal generational cohorts are defined as follows:

- Millennials – born between 1980 and 2000
- Generation Xers – born between 1965 and 1980
- Boomers – born between 1944 and 1965

We sought specific recommendations as to how both individual organizations, funders, and the field as a whole, might address the generational challenges and better exploit our assets to become more sensitive to generational issues. We stipulated that we wanted practical recommendations that took into consideration: i) budgets and financial constraints, particularly in the current economic climate; ii) staff / senior management time limitations; and iii) complexity of implementation.

Our purpose in this Phase remains to educate and inform the sector as to the scope and depth of the impact of generational differences within our work places, so that increased awareness of the realities can empower management within the sector to address the challenges, and exploit the opportunities, as the same relates to recruiting, retaining and managing different generations.

#### **FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY:**

The core of this project phase was the formation of eight focus groups, six of which were composed exclusively of Millennials and Gen Xers, and two of which were composed exclusively of Boomers. Group participants were chosen from a pool of applicants comprising a representative cross section sampling of San Francisco Bay Area arts organizations and arts administrators. Each focus group met for a total of six hours over a three month period in facilitated discussions examining the generational differences in attitudes, preferences and behaviors within the nonprofit arts sector. Separate group meetings examined: i) obstacles and barriers, ii) assets and opportunities, and iii) specific recommendations to the field.

## **C**ONCLUSIONS:

### **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:**

**Recruitment:** The projected fierce competition (based on upcoming baby boomer retirement) for a shrinking pool of new managerial talent is now not likely to be a factor for three reasons: 1) the current global economic crisis has already resulted in downsizing and a reduced demand for new employees across the entire economy. What was a clear seller's market a decade ago is now gone; 2) because of the stock market downturn, and because numerous boomers failed to adequately plan for retirement, a percentage of baby boomers aren't likely to retire on schedule, and of those who do, many will continue to work part time, further expanding the pool of available employees. It is also likely that many boomers from the private sector will transition to the nonprofit sector; and 3) the arts will continue to be an attractive alternative for many entry level workers who want to be involved in creative enterprises. Thus, recruitment is not likely to be a major challenge for arts & culture organizations in the near term. Recruiting the best and the brightest will, of course, continue to challenge every sector.

**Retention:** The real challenge for both public and private, nonprofit and 'for profit' organizations will be to effectively manage different generations working side by side in the same workplace, and doing so in a way which optimizes retention of employees already trained and experienced.

### **CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS:**

1. There are profound and sharp differences in generational attitudes towards a wide range of issues of work within the nonprofit arts sector, based on differing experiences, customs, perspectives, priorities and thinking. How these differences are managed dramatically impacts job satisfaction, performance, loyalty and longer term career commitment of the younger cohorts.

2. From the perspective of the younger cohorts, senior level management is largely unaware of, unsympathetic to, and unimpressed with the reality of generational differences, the challenges those differences pose, and the impact of those differences on their organizations. The younger cohort sees a pronounced lack of senior management sensitivity to generational issues within their organizations and this lack is a major cause of younger cohort dissatisfaction, turnover and exodus from the field.
3. Based on both the Focus Group Participant Survey of the younger and older cohorts, and the Focus Group discussions, senior management labors under some erroneous assumptions and perceptions as to what their junior staff's attitudes and beliefs are in a number of important areas. The younger generations in the arts workforce do not necessarily think or believe as the older generation presumes they do. This lack of understanding on the part of senior management may make it more difficult to effectively manage the different generations in the workforce. The act of erroneous presumption may be two way generational street. Cross generational dialogue would help to dispel myths and fallacious assumptions.
4. The nonprofit arts sector has yet to institutionalize the belief that systemic turnover in junior employee ranks is a serious threat to organizational stability, or fully appreciate that it is more cost effective to find ways to keep employees than to constantly fill vacancies with inexperienced and untrained new people.
5. Managing different generations in the workplace is not prohibitively difficult and effective generational management increases employee retention, productivity, and job satisfaction.
6. There are specific problems for younger cohort employees in our sector that need to be addressed, including:

- The lack of a *living* (not necessarily competitive), but *living* wage for entry level arts administrators.
  - Too few opportunities exist within organizations for vertical advancement & promotion.
  - There is a dearth of professional development / skills improvement opportunities for junior level employees, and an insatiable demand for such offerings.
  - The exclusion of younger staff from intra-organizational communications loops, and the lack of delegated decision making authority to younger cohorts.
  - Younger employee's perceived lack of trust and respect by older generations.
  - The fundamental lack (on the part of senior management) of a basic understanding of younger generational thinking in terms of work / life balance and what is and isn't an acceptable work load.
  - The endemic, pervasive failure to appreciate younger cohort attitudes towards the absolute necessity of maintaining current technology.
  - The need for more networking, bonding and "fun" as part of the work experience.
7. It is the nature of the work, the exhilaration of working on creative projects, and the chance to positively impact the community that are the major attractions to working in the field. Other positive aspects of working in the nonprofit arts sector include:
- Flexible scheduling and a relaxed work environment
  - Tolerance of risk-taking.
  - Multi-task juggling and the acquisition of a balance of skills.
  - The opportunity to develop creative links, networks and skills levels, and to incubate personal creative projects.
  - Perks such as free tickets to cultural events.

- The collaborative environment and bonding with quality professionals.

Both the existing literature on generational differences and the results of our Focus Groups suggest that the critical elements that younger generations seem to want from their jobs (in addition to more money and benefits) are:

- MEANING – belief in the Mission of the work and in both the real and potential impact of that work.
- INCLUSION – kept in the information loop, delegated real authority, respected for skills level and potential to make real contributions.
- LIFE / WORK BALANCE – appreciation of generational differences in prioritizing work vs. life, and reasonable work loads.
- APPRECIATION – being made to feel valued; rewarded based on merit.
- LEARNING – expanded opportunities for professional development at all career points.
- CAREER PATH OPTIONS – interest in developing career paths for employees, and for opportunities for regular advancement and promotion.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **GENERAL:**

The keys to effectively managing the “generational divides” that manifest themselves in the workplace include:

- Learning about generational differences, potential collisions and challenges - then actively promoting sensitivity to the issues across the organization.
- Trusting and respecting employee hires. Delegating more real authority.
- Coaching and communicating, not criticizing and excluding.
- Providing as many training / professional development options as is possible.



- Running a meritocracy based advancement system. Providing some alternative to promotion if open spaces are not available (even if only a change in job title.)
- Allowing for a life / work balance; making the workplace experience enjoyable.

**SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:** (see full discussion in the body of the main report)

**FOR INDIVIDUAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

1. CREATE SENSITIVITY TO THE CHALLENGE: Put the issue of generational differences / potential clash points on the organization's agenda. Dispel erroneous assumptions and beliefs. Assess what is working and what is not, by involving both Boards and staffs (and to a lesser extent volunteers, supporters and clients) in an open dialogue between *all* generations within the organization. Identify specific problems and solutions to those problems. Follow-up.
2. IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS: Commit to keeping everyone on staff in the loop so that everyone gains a better understanding of all aspects of the organization and their role in it. Make sure to employ generationally sensitive means of communications to maximize efficiency and employee retention.
3. PROVIDE LOTS OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – to everyone in the organization including senior management and Board members. Include skills training as an annual budget item. Identify sources of cost free training. Explore internal and external mentorship possibilities. Support junior management attendance at conferences and events which can be learning / training experiences for them.

4. DELEGATE REAL DECISION MAKING AUTHORITY to as great an extent as possible. Hire good people and provide them with good training, then trust them to do a good job. If they fail, replace them, but don't squander their potential contributions to the organization by marginalizing their skills set levels, their ideas or their experiences. Demonstrate valuation of employee hires by showing trust and respect. Thank staff for work well done.
5. MODIFY THE ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE to welcome and accommodate all generations. Fight against doing the same things in the same way they have always been done. Allow the organization to take risks in changing and adapting management styles. Respect each generation's experiences, language, and etiquette.
6. INCREASE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR JUNIOR LEVEL EMPLOYEES TO NETWORK with senior supervisory staff and their own peers, both within the organization and within the larger field.
7. ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF ADVANCEMENT, PROMOTION AND CAREER PATH DECISIONS. Provide as much counseling and / or career resources as possible. If vertical advancement opportunities are limited, consider increased authority level, new titles, or other reward / acknowledgement systems. Tolerate, even encourage, lateral movement within the sector as an alternative.
8. HELP IDENTIFY PREFERRED PERKS, then provide them.
9. PROVIDE FREQUENT PERFORMANCE REVIEWS AND FEEDBACK. Make the process a two way street between senior and junior level employees.
10. FACILITATE AND NURTURE EMPLOYEE CREATIVE INTERESTS AND ENTERPRISES wherever possible. Share the positive experience of working

with artists and the creative process with all employees to the extent possible.

11. CONSCIOUSLY WORK AT INTEGRATING “FUN” INTO THE WORKPLACE.
12. BRING STAFF AND BOARD CLOSER TOGETHER. Familiarize the Board of Directors with job descriptions for all management / administrative employees and create access paths by and between board members and staff, including mentoring opportunities.
13. INCLUDE A LINE ITEM IN THE ANNUAL BUDGET FOR UPDATING THE ORGANIZATION’S TECHNOLOGY (hardware and software and training in new applications use).

**FOR FUNDERS:**

1. SUPPORT AND FUND UNDERSTANDING OF, AND SENSITIVITY TO, GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES WITHIN ARTS ORGANIZATIONS through dissemination of educational materials, coupled with personalized training (conferences, workshops, seminars, webinars, podcasts, coaching or other means).
2. CONSIDER MAKING IT A MANDATORY PART OF THE GRANT APPLICATION TO SET FORTH THE APPLICANT ORGANIZATION’S PLAN FOR ADDRESSING GENERATIONAL ISSUES.
3. SUPPORT INCREASED ON-GOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES for *all* arts administrators, including entry level, junior level mid-level, *and* senior managers
4. SUPPORT INCUBATION OF JUNIOR LEVEL ARTS ADMINISTRATOR CREATIVE IMPULSES AND ENTERPRISES.

5. PROVIDE TRAINING AND RESOURCE MATERIALS TO SENIOR LEADERSHIP IN SPECIFIC IDENTIFIED AREAS OF NEED, including:
  - a. How to create an effective system for two-way performance review and feedback.
  - b. Delegation of authority; avoidance of micromanagement.
  - c. Communications
  
6. PROVIDE INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR NETWORKING within and between generations – including crossover for both creative and administrative employees.
  
7. SUPPORT GRANTEE EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN CURRENT TECHNOLOGY CAPACITY (hardware and software).
  
8. CONSIDER MANDATING APPOINTMENT OF YOUNGER COHORT MEMBERS TO BOARDS OF DIRECTORS AS A CONDITION TO RECEIVING FUNDING.
  
9. SUPPORT EFFORTS TO PIGGY-BACK (AND EXPAND) EXISTING K-12 ARTS PROGRAMS TO EDUCATE / INFORM STUDENTS OF THE EXISTENCE OF ARTS ADMINISTRATION AS A CAREER PATH OPTION. Consider support for project based internship programs, arts administration career path websites and expanded job fair / college campus presence as ways to support sector wide recruitment efforts.