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Mid-Career Professional Development: Long-Term Asset or Short-Term Liability?

(1)

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In December 2007, *CultureWork* published the first of two articles about some of the issues facing mid-career arts administrators titled “No Longer Emerging, Not Ready to Retire: A Look at Mid-Career Arts Managers” (<http://aad.uoregon.edu/culturework/culturework39.html>). The article outlines the results of a survey of nonprofit arts professionals between the ages of 35 and 59. The results indicate that many of those surveyed experienced some loss of enthusiasm or engagement in their work as well as a sense of plateau as their arts-related careers enter second or third decades. These responses are coupled, however, with a strong desire to continue working in a professional field about which the respondents are passionate. This follow-up article, examines select ways in which mid-career arts managers can be supported so that they may continue to find pleasure, fulfillment, and motivation in their work over the thirty-plus years considered mid-career.

The Mid-Careerist's Profile

The period defined as mid-career, for the purposes of this article, is no less than ten years working in the non-profit arts and culture field and no less than 10 years before retirement. The age range is roughly between 35 and 59 years, with some leeway for those retiring earlier or later. This is not a generational moniker, so much as it is a period of time in which people of any generation are experiencing the middle years of their careers;

a time when the momentum of a new career has worn off, but there are still many productive years before retirement. People at mid-career are contemplating their desire accept the additional challenges of positions with greater authority, starting families, newly empty nests, caring for aging parents, and the connections between their life values and their professional missions.

The previous article began with the hypothesis that the lack of fulfillment of these needs will cause burnout and lead people to leave the field; however, the data gathered through an online survey did not bear this out. In fact, out of 80 respondents, 68% said that they were not interested in leaving the non-profit arts sector and 85% indicated that they were either “fulfilled” or “very fulfilled” in their careers. While leaving the field did not seem to pose the largest threat, a more focused examination of the mid-careerist’s feelings about their current job told us that they may be looking for a new position outside of their current organization instead.

To Retain or Release Talented Workers

For many, mid-career is a time in which one is more likely to consider leaving a current job in order to take work in an organization that might indicate promise of greater career fulfillment or address a need for increased salary or benefits, intrinsic and extrinsic. Over half (58%) of those we surveyed indicated that they were either “likely” or “very likely” to change jobs in the next three years. Eighty-one percent indicated that their work was not stimulating their intellectual interests and they would like more rewarding professional opportunities for growth. Furthermore, 78% of this cohort stated that: 1) I do not have the ability to move up in my current organization and I would like greater professional responsibility; *and* 2) I would like a change in my work situation but I don’t know what change I’m looking for.

While we as a field have examined the importance of succession planning and filling the vacancies left by retiring Baby Boomers, the importance of retaining and re-engaging talented staff people within our organizations has never been more important. To paraphrase a statement in *Workforce Crisis: How to Beat the Coming Shortage of Skills and Talent* (Dychtwald, Erikson & Morison, 2006), we should worry about mid-career crises because organizations will need staff members, in addition to their leaders and key performers, in order to ensure “productivity today and retention tomorrow, when the labor and talent shortage hits.” They go on to state that “Every day that an employee is less than fully engaged in the work and goals for the enterprise, energy and focus and contribution are left on the table – productivity lost and never to be recovered” (Dychtwald et al, p. 67).

A cursory review of two non-profit arts management texts that are considered “must-haves” for every arts administrator, *Managing a Nonprofit Organization in the 21st Century* (Wolf, 1999) and *Fundamentals of Arts Management* (Korza, Brown & Dreeszen,

2007) provided little assistance regarding staff retention. While both deal extensively with hiring, firing, personnel procedures, grievances, and leadership changes; neither text discusses why it is important or how to retain staff once hired. Their approaches focus on how to build the team, not how to keep the team once it is in place. In our current economy and with our current workforce demands, staff turnover is a luxury few could argue that they can afford.

Re-energizing at Mid-Career

There are some measures that have been taken by and for the non-profit arts field , which help re-engage and re-energize a disaffected employee, while at the same time strengthening the organization with one that is more enthusiastic, motivated, and productive. Our survey provided respondents with a few types of support programs that are commonly used to help people navigate the mid-career years and asked for their input; they shared the following:

Professional Coaching

54% indicated either a desire to receive professional coaching or to know more about coaching.

27% indicated that they either were currently or had received coaching services.

82% perceived that the greatest barrier to participating in a coaching program is the cost, followed by lack of time (60%) and lack of information about reputable services (49%).

Peer Networks

81% said that they felt they had a supportive network of colleagues to “share professional successes, challenges or dilemmas” with 40% indicating that they would like a new or expanded peer network that meets in person and 25% stating that they would like a new or expanded online network.

Professional Development

78% indicated an interest in professional or leadership development programs rather than a formal course of study (e.g. returning to college for an advanced degree).

With research pointing to the importance of retaining talented mid-careerists and survey respondents desiring greater support but uncertainty about how to get it, the following recommendations are offered. They address respondents identified needs for further learning, career development, and increased engagement with their peers. They are

targeted at mid-careerists and organizations with mid-careerists on staff, as well as foundations, service organizations, and local arts agencies that create programs and support services for those in the arts and culture sector.

Career Development

While some could argue that the responsibility for rekindling mid-careerists lies with the employee, the long view suggests that the responsibility should be shared. Often the only perceived avenue for the under stimulated employee is to seek greater excitement elsewhere, which results in the loss of an often key staff person for the organization. Organizations that understand the value of listening to and thinking imaginatively with its employees about creating solutions will find greater employee loyalty, productivity, and enthusiasm. In our under-resourced non-profit worlds this kind of attention to human resources and employee development seems time-consuming and costly, but time and money will be saved when the organization does not have to fill a vacant position, train a new staff person, and possibly experience the loss of an employee with a valuable organizational knowledge base. Organizations will also benefit from the reputations they can build for being one that cares about its employees' workplace satisfaction and that values active learning and professional growth (Field, 2006).

What does career development look like? Primarily, career development goes beyond professional development in that it looks at the whole person, not just the worker with a set of job requirements. Career development includes participation in coaching or mentoring programs; expanding or redesigning job descriptions to generate new prospects for one's professional growth and personal creativity; promotions that provide more autonomy or leadership opportunities; or taking part in fresh training or action learning programs. Dychtwald, et al. (2006) asserts that mid-career workers are often ready for a *serious dose* (p. 83) of training and development, that is, in-depth education in a new or expanded area of interest, not a series of short courses or workshops that are generally considered standard offerings for non-profit workers (2).

Internal efforts to improve on an organization's career development procedures require greater listening and inquiry on the part of those who manage mid-careerists. It is important to understand what employees like and dislike about their jobs as well as to make a commitment to addressing the mid-careerists needs once identified. When managers and employees discuss what matters most to an employee and what makes them thrive at work, they can work together to tailor future work assignments.

People's skills can be used beneficially in ways often not considered when they are initially hired. Over time, skill sets and professional interests may change. When employees' skills and talents are not used in ways that are congruent with what excites them about their work, they are at risk of becoming dissatisfied and uncommitted. Often

job mastery and personal growth lead to changes in what matters most to someone during the mid-career years. An organization's ability and desire to work with an employee to adapt his or her new interests and greater skills to activities that increase job satisfaction can go a long way towards ensuring employee retention.

Professional Coaching

One way that a mid-careerist can begin to explore what matters most and how they might best use their skills is through work with a professional coach. A coach may be hired to help someone get from point A to point B. Coaches are not therapists, but facilitators of one's thinking about their work and how they can be most fulfilled, productive, or creative. This type of coaching helps with personal career questions as well as entrepreneurial or organizational needs. Professional and executive coaching are more common in the private and for-profit sectors than they are in the non-profit sector. Corporations often pay for their executives and managers to receive services of a professional coach to assist them with human resources issues, time management, productivity, and career advancement, among other things.

People in the non-profit sector have no less need for the services of a good coach, but they often feel that the costs are prohibitive. Eighty-two percent of our survey respondents indicated that cost was the primary barrier to receiving the services of a coach, with 60% indicating that lack of time was a factor, and 49% indicating that locating a reputable coach was a barrier. Others indicated their concern about finding someone who understood the needs of one working in the non-profit arts sector as an issue as well.

Coaching Circles

Several service organizations, including the National Association of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC) (<http://www.namac.org>); New York Foundation for the Arts (<http://www.nyfa.org>) and Illinois Arts Alliance Foundation (<http://www.artsalliance.org>) have recognized the value of coaching for arts professionals and have developed peer coaching circles in response. These are innovative and cost effective methods for meeting their constituencies' needs for affordable coaching experiences while also engaging them in greater networking and peer support. While the program designs differ somewhat, the basic premises are the same: a select group of professionals with similar job descriptions (executive directors, development directors, etc.) "gather" monthly, forming circles, on the phone or in person to coach one another towards meeting their individual professional goals. The circles are led by a trained facilitator, often an experienced coach, who trains participants in the active listening and inquiry methods that are used by professional coaches to guide their clients. The participants use these techniques to coach fellow group members. Each person receives individual time with the group to work on their current professional goals as well as time to practice their coaching skills with others in the group.

Participants benefit from the coaching experience and greater ability to set and meet their goals. Organizations benefit when participants take these coaching techniques back to their workplace interactions with other staff members. A participation fee is generally required (an average of \$100 - \$300 for the entire program) that helps offset facilitation and administration costs. This is considerably less than private coaching which can cost several hundred dollars per month. The meetings take place once or twice a month for two or three hours. Coaching circles generally meet for anywhere from six months to a year.

While it might seem that the time commitment, a minimum of several hours each month, is considerable; Daniel "Dewey" Schott (January 9, 2008), Senior Manager of Leadership Services at NAMAC stated in a phone interview that their evaluation responses were "off the charts" with positive participant feedback. Lisa May Simpson (January 17, 2008), Program Manager with the Illinois Arts Alliance Foundation indicated in a personal communication that some of their groups are so valued that they continue to meet after the formal program is completed.

Mentoring Circles

A variation on the coaching circle is the Mentoring Circle developed by the League of American Orchestras (http://www.americanorchestras.org/mentoring_circles/index.html).

These are similar in design and objectives; however, they are not based on coaching concepts. Rather, they provide opportunities for those in similar job areas (e.g. executive directors or development directors) to meet via conference call with an experienced facilitator who guides them through a 90-minute monthly discussion group. The program's goals are to provide new opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and to assist those in the circle with developing working solutions and new approaches to their work challenges. Allison Ball, Director of Leadership Training and Recruitment stated in a phone interview (January 31, 2007) that several of their discussion groups have continued to meet after the formal program is over as well. Ball noted that the Mentoring Circles aid a strong need for networking and peer support particularly by those in mid-sized (budgets of \$500,000 to \$2 million) organizations.

Sabbaticals

Sabbaticals are common in the medical and higher educational fields, but almost non-existent in the non-profit arts and culture sector. In those sectors that encourage sabbaticals, there is an understanding that time out for rest, renewal, and research can provide a career break that helps "people return with their creative juices flowing, with fresh perspectives on how to perform work, and often with new insights" (Dychtwald, p. 84).

Two well-established programs, the Arts Council of Indianapolis' Creative Renewal Arts Fellowship program and The Durfee Foundation's Sabbatical Programs for non-profit leaders in Los Angeles, are excellent models for others to replicate.

Creative Renewal

In 1999, the Arts Council of Indianapolis launched the Creative Renewal Arts Fellowship Program (3) with funding from the Lilly Endowment. The concept is similar to an academic sabbatical designed to encourage rest from the work load with time for reflection, and more importantly for those dedicated to artistic expression, time for creative renewal. The program has served over 200 artists and arts administrators with grants of \$7,500 that are used for research, instruction, conference attendance, apprenticeships, or other skill building opportunities, as well as other opportunities that help the recipients explore their artistry, refresh their creativity, and recharge their spirit (Arts Council of Indianapolis, p. 6, 2006).

In addition to geographic requirements, eligible participants must be able to show that a) their primary source of income for at least three years was derived from an arts and/or culturally related art form or have ten years experience in the arts, and b) be willing to share with the community, by way of public presentation, the results of their fellowship. The applicants are selected with particular attention to how the artist or administrator would use the fellowship to positively influence, affect, or enrich the local artistic community (Arts Council of Indianapolis, p. 7).

The program's most recent annual report for 2005-2006 indicated a vast range of activities that Creative Renewal Fellows engaged in during their time away that included: reconnecting with their craft (e.g. composing, choreographing, studio time); travel with study related to their artistry; extended time for study or research in an area of interest, learning a new craft, or being a cultural tourist. In a career field that is dominated by artists who work in a variety of administrative settings often with little time to connect with their own creative passions, the Creative Renewal program helps them re-engage with the very thing that brings them to life.

An example of how a sabbatical program can increase future workplace productivity and enthusiasm has been found in the story of Creative Renewal Fellow Steve Roberson, a full time arts administrator. Roberson used his fellowship to rededicate himself to making music so that he could regain the joy he found in playing the piano. "Loss of identity as a role model ill serves any leader, but the most pernicious result is a loss of dedication and focus" Roberson stated. He spent his sabbatical year rediscovering his musical voice with daily piano practicing, teaching, and lecturing. Roberson emerged with "...renewed clarity [about] why I chose the arts as a way of making a living and a way of living." He has since returned to his work as Associate Dean of Jordan College of Fine Arts with an

increased appreciation for his art form and a refreshed desire to enrich the lives of the young artists studying at Butler University (Arts Council of Indianapolis, p. 35).

The Arts Council of Indianapolis' initial goal for the program was to bolster the potential of art in central Indiana. They determined that in order to do this they must first bolster the artist, believing that the effects of career fatigue on artists and arts administrators are a threat to the very core of what makes a community vibrant. They further concluded that arts professionals need rediscovery, not just relief. Those who have advocated for mid-career sabbaticals would agree with the notion that careerists who are losing enthusiasm need to reawaken their creativity and increase their intellectual stimulation. Sabbaticals have provided these opportunities for those most at risk of disengagement.

The Durfee Foundation

With a different orientation towards renewal, The Durfee Foundation ([4](#)), a Los Angeles philanthropic foundation, has made grants to six Los Angeles County non-profit organizations each year that allow their principal leaders to take extended leave (generally three months) for rejuvenation. The Foundation's Executive Director Claire Peeps, indicated in a phone interview (August 30, 2007) that grantees are discouraged from engaging in work-related activities or even those that have specific goals. Instead they encourage them to travel, renew hobbies, or enjoy greater free time. The purpose is to enable them to disconnect from their goal-oriented, often over-booked lives. The grantee's organization receives \$30,000 to cover the cost of the staff person's salary while away and other costs incurred. In addition it receives \$5,000 to create or augment a budget line item for future professional development with the expectation that this item will remain in the budget and be replenished from year to year.

Often executive directors burn out from over work and an enormous sense of responsibility to the organization, including the assumption that the organization will fail without them. The Foundation helps the person on sabbatical as well as the organization overcome this notion by supporting "secondary leadership" to take the lead in the executive director's absence. The foundation does not select organizations that propose hiring an interim director; instead they enable the next-in-line to learn greater leadership within the organization. Grantees are encouraged to develop management plans and to identify existing staff to step into the interim role. The Foundation compensates the interim leader with a stipend and other recognition activities for those who run the organization during the sabbatical period.

The program has graduated six leaders each year since 1997 and created a powerful network of Durfee grantees in the Los Angeles County non-profit arena. Peeps stated that to date all have returned to their positions and continued to lead the organization for several years following the sabbatical.

One recent graduate of the program, Laurie T. Schell, Executive Director of the California Alliance for Arts Education (CAAE), spoke of her experience in a phone interview (February 22, 2008). Schell has been working in the non-profit arts education field for almost 30 years and with the CAAE for the last seven years. Until recently, she was the sole staff person of the agency, which is devoted to statewide arts education advocacy. In 2007 with a stable staff, Schell applied for a Durfee grant with the hope of “taking a much needed time out” following a particularly difficult 18-month period personally and professionally. She used her time for pleasure travel, visiting family, and helping her son prepare for and move away for his freshman year in college. She noted in an interview that the time off helped her find her “unserious side”, buried by years of professional responsibilities. She also found that her staff could manage the organization very well in her absence. With time to reflect on her accomplishments, she was able to acknowledge that the hard work that precipitated the need for a sabbatical was significant and meaningful. Almost six months later, she has found that while some of the initial glow of the experience has worn off she still has a connection to her reflective time out that is deeply profound. The internal changes that took place have continued to help her find strength and meaning in her advocacy work.

Conclusions

The focus of this article has been to address the needs of mid-career non-profit arts and culture workers to facilitate talent retention within organizations and support the backbone of our workforce. While the recommendations are aimed at supporting mid-careerists, the importance of using a variety of programs and listening skills to engage, energize, and retain valued staff at any career stage cannot be overstated. With the younger generations’ trend towards job changes every two or three years and retiring senior staff members on the rise, organizations need to place greater emphasis on managing and supporting existing staff. As Morison, Erickson, & Dychtwald (2006) asserted in *Managing Middlence*, programs or techniques directed towards the mid-career cohort will have the greatest impact.

Historically, the non-profit arts sector has paid greater attention to hiring and firing, while assuming that constant turnover is expected. Human resources and personnel management have been more afterthought than practice, leaving those at mid-career to muddle through or move on. Organizations, individuals, and the sector as a whole will find greater capacity for sustainability and productivity when accepting the long view of shared responsibility for the career development of its greatest assets.

1. This is the second article of a two part series. Part one was published in the [Fall 2007 issue of *CultureWork*](#). [[back to text](#)]

2. For information about arts-specific programs of this depth and caliber consider the Arts Leadership Institute at Teachers College, Columbia University (http://www.artsandbusiness-ny.org/leadership_development/ali/default.asp) and those implemented nationwide by National Arts Strategies (<http://www.artstrategies.org>). [[back to text](#)]

3. For more information about Creative Renewal Arts Fellowship Program see http://www.artscouncilofindianapolis.org/grants_for_individuals/creative_renewal_arts_fellowship_program_43.html. [[back to text](#)]

4. For information about the Durfee Foundation Sabbatical Program see <http://www.durfee.org/programs/sabbatical/index.html>. [[back to text](#)]

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