

# Ensuring Effective Leadership in Non-Profit Theaters

Artistically, diversity can nurture our souls and our shared humanity. It enriches art by introducing more viewpoints and attracting a wider audience, simultaneously addressing the economics of the theater's survival. However, research shows that women and people of color are vastly underrepresented in theater leadership positions, even though women are present in large numbers in next-in-line positions throughout theaters.

The study on which these guidelines are based focused on the persistent gender and racial disparity among artistic and executive/managing directors of theaters, and on how this disparity can be addressed. The study found that the largest barrier facing women and people of color on the path to senior leadership was the selection committee process.

In that process, men benefit from a strong, persistent male-leader stereotype. As a byproduct of the committee members' unconscious biases, a deeper trust is placed in men's potential.

The scarcity of women in leadership lends credence to the glass ceiling metaphor, where women can see the top but cannot get there.

## Trustees Driving Excellence by Leveraging Diversity

*As a Board of Trustees member for a large theater company, your responsibility is much wider than to oversee the fiduciary health of the theater. One of your most profound responsibilities is the selection of the company's leadership.*

*This guide provides the tools you need as a Board member to achieve greater equity for more effective theater leadership.*

### When selecting a leader:

- Use vacancies in leadership as an opportunity for the theater to engage in self-examination: Where has the theater not met the diversity and inclusion goals of its mission? This reflection will help articulate the skills and experiences to include in the job description for the next leader.
- Help guide the development of clear criteria for a bias-free scoring template for hiring across the theater field. Start by articulating the expected level of competence of a leader. Have this template vetted by experts on diversity and inclusion in the industry.
- Ensure diverse search committee membership that includes a variety of voices. Make sure each voice gets heard by instituting unanimous voting which enhances underrepresented groups' visibility and effective participation.
- Conduct a publicly posted, external search for all major leadership positions, which will expose you to the widest slate of candidates.
- Commit to interviewing applicants from underrepresented groups (consider the Rooney Rule). Only hire search firms with a record of placing diverse candidates in similar positions.
- Ask the search firm to initially disguise the personal and demographic characteristics of leadership candidates, so as not to be influenced by characteristics irrelevant to doing the job.
- Reconsider demanding exceptional fundraising skills from artistic director candidates. Instead, look for core skills:
  - skill and enthusiasm for speaking about the theater
  - relationship-building skills that can lead to deep, personal bonds with potential donors
  - willingness to support development efforts.
- Continue to support artistic director growth once on board.
- Consider investing in professional leadership coaches for a new hire over the first year of the transition.
- Provide support to the leadership team during the transition period to a new leader. This is particularly important for theaters that have shared/dual leadership.

Shaping a Better World through Research & Action

**Wellesley Centers for Women**

**A.C.T.** AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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### Ongoing support of your theater's leaders:

- Schedule regular check-ins of structured time to engage, mentor, support, and learn from your theater's leaders. Provide, for example:
  - support for artistic or cultural choices
  - professional coaching for managing a large team and budget.
- Take action to streamline conditions of employment and salary equity.
- Provide leaders and aspiring leaders with clear and specific goals, and tie performance evaluations to business accomplishments that are aligned with the theater's mission, including its diversity and inclusion mission.

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For a full list of acknowledgements, please visit our website, [wcwonline.org/theaterleadership](http://wcwonline.org/theaterleadership)

### Support for the internal theater community:

- Recognize, confront, and correct instances of gender and racial bias within the board and among staff.
  - Anonymous surveys about experiences of bias among employees are a productive first step in identifying any potential friction.
  - Create an internal diversity committee, which includes board membership, to ensure the topic has a place in each conversation.
- Make work-life balance a topic for open conversation at all employment levels (e.g., child care, excessive working hours). Develop a work-life balance framework that increases equity and equal opportunities for growth.
- Ensure that aspiring leaders participate in fundraising and board relations so they can cultivate those important skills.
- Create opportunities for career development at both early- and mid-career junctions. Develop and participate in mentorship programs specifically for high-potential women and people of color.
- Invest in your theater's education programs to attract young people into careers in the theater.
- Mentor a variety of aspiring leaders, from various genders, cultures, and races. Keeping diversity in mind, replicate what works.
- Initiate and support conversations with state and federal government to increase funding for the arts and introduce a jobs program that includes paid work at theaters or other arts institutions.

## Resources

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For more information on the Women's Leadership in Resident Theaters project and other recommendations for theater professionals, visit [wcwonline.org/theaterleadership](http://wcwonline.org/theaterleadership) or contact [theaterstudy@wellesley.edu](mailto:theaterstudy@wellesley.edu).