

Women's Leadership in Resident Theaters

Brief Summary¹ of Results and Recommendations

Sumru Erkut

Ineke Ceder

Wellesley Centers for Women

Wellesley College

August 2016

Commissioned by Carey Perloff, Artistic Director,
and Ellen Richard, Former Executive Director,
American Conservatory Theater, San Francisco

Supported by a major grant from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation,
with additional funding from the Valentine Foundation,
Wellesley Centers for Women, and individual donors

Introduction

Background

Women's representation in the leadership of member theaters of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) has hovered around 25% for years. In 2013-14, women occupied 21% of the artistic director (AD) positions and 38% of the top executive/managerial director (ED) spots in the 74 member theaters. There were no EDs of color, female or male, and only 6 people of color had AD positions — 5 men and 1 woman. Positions just below leadership were occupied by a more gender-balanced group, but people of color held few "next-in-line" positions immediately below the top leadership. This indicates the operation of a glass ceiling, a metaphor for

the barriers facing women stuck at middle management, where they can see the top but cannot reach it. The scarcity of women and men of color at the top appears to be a function of both a glass ceiling and of insufficient numbers in the candidate pool hired and retained in LORT member-theaters.

This study examines why so few women hold the top leadership positions in theaters and what can be done to increase their numbers. As such, it is a study of positional leadership within the members of a service organization. It is not a study of the service organization itself.

Study Design

We designed a multifaceted information gathering strategy. We conducted 97 interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including artistic and executive directors, and people on the pathway to leadership, from a randomly selected sample of 24 LORT member-theaters. The selected theaters represented three budget groups: \$2-5 million; \$5-10 million; and \$10+ million. Because top leaders have been recruited from both inside and outside LORT member-theaters, our research into those on the path to leadership involved two separate, confidential online surveys of people both inside *and* outside of LORT. A survey pertaining to the artistic side of the theater was conducted with director-members of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (998 surveys), while a survey pertaining to management and operations was conducted with top managers and people in positions immediately below them in both LORT theaters and others that are members of Theatre Communications Group (TCG) with budgets above \$1,000,000 (333 surveys). Information from the interviews and surveys was augmented by information from service organization sources, mainly TCG and LORT archival websites, theater websites, and resumes and bio-sketches of LORT theater leaders and those in the positions just below them (~300 documents). Further, we had extensive conversations with 30 experts in the theater field including members of Boards of Trustees of LORT theaters who had been involved in the leader selection process, search firm professionals who manage searches for top leadership positions, and key theater professionals who were referred to us by their colleagues.



What we learned

1. Familiarity and Trust

- In general, women remain outsiders in theater leadership, except when those who make the hiring decision **know** their work: women are promoted to AD positions within the theater at which they were already employed at much higher rates than men.
- In the largest-budget LORT theaters (+\$10 million), Boards have been more likely to hire a male executive director even if he came from a **smaller** theater than they have been to hire a woman with a similar smaller-budget theater background.
- Even though having **founded** a theater is an asset, Boards of LORT theaters were more willing to hire male founders than female ones.

These findings lead us to conclude the Board search committees are less frequently willing to trust that women have what it takes to run arts organizations. Boards in charge of hiring need to become aware of unintentional/unconscious biases as an important first step toward ensuring that all qualified candidates are evaluated on their merit and credentials.

At the onset of a leadership search, a Board should develop the expected level of competence required of their leaders based on the theater's mission and what is currently needed to (re-)align with it. The resulting list of competencies and skills can serve as evaluation criteria to examine a slate of candidates. It will help Boards recognize that many women and people of color are well prepared for the top role by virtue of their skills, training, experiences, tenure, and education.

2. Work-Life Balance

The discussion of family responsibilities appears to be a taboo in theater companies. This presents a high, hidden hurdle to progression for those who care for others.

- Requirements for a successful life in the theater (which may include extensive travel, and long and irregular hours) can be barriers to participation for caregivers (who are mostly women) and more importantly operate as hidden biases, which quietly affect the hiring or promotion process.

To level the playing field between caregivers and others, theater professionals must have open conversations about family responsibilities. Solutions such as flexible working hours, working from home, support for child/family care, and basic recognition of life responsibilities outside the work place benefit everyone.

3. Culture Fit

Simply hiring people who have remained outside of theater leadership will not guarantee that diversity will be achieved. Sustained success in diversifying leadership and the pathways to it requires making adjustments to the prevailing cultures of many theaters where various groups may have been un(der)represented in leadership. Interviewees reported incidents where they felt pushed to the side, unseen, and underappreciated for their contributions. Gender identity and expression, race/ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, and class background all are potential sources of disadvantage or even discrimination. Organizations need to adapt to welcome diversity and change, and need to create safe spaces for discussion of differences.

4. Mentoring

Both leaders and those aspiring to leadership stressed the key role mentoring plays in preparing someone for a top position, but acknowledged mentors to be in **short supply**. Women and people of color told us they are especially looking for mentors who have had similar experiences on their career paths as they do, for example with family care or with being one of few people of color in a theater.

5. Affordability

Moving toward greater diversity will require support for the **financial burden** of career development for those aspiring to leadership. Graduate degrees are expensive, and many internships and fellowships that provide essential preparation do not pay a living wage.

6. Limited Number of Leadership Openings

The **long tenure** of many leaders in LORT member-theaters can be a limiting factor for diversity.

ⁱ This brief summary highlights only our most important findings. The full, much longer report will be available in Fall 2016.