

# **WorkInCulture Report for Ontario Association of Art Galleries**

## **The Leadership and Cultural Pluralism Project**

**June 2016**

### **1. Background and Goals**

Succession planning has challenged the cultural sector for a long time: some of the challenges include uncompetitive compensation and conditions, a gap in management training and professional development, and small workforces that do not provide internal advancement opportunities. Several years ago the Ontario Association of Art Galleries (OAAG) also acknowledged that another complicating factor was the gap in cultural diversity in the executive leadership levels. Yet expanding the pool of workers upon which galleries draw can only enhance creative programming, expand the possibility of partnerships, improve community engagement and draw talent with new expertise and perspectives to decision-making.

Many studies point to mentorship programs as a way of enhancing access for culturally diverse arts professionals. Not only do they make it possible to transferring knowledge in fields that don't have lots of professional development opportunities, but they also offer customized low-cost training, expand networks and access, and potentially open up cultural leadership opportunities.

Based on its research, OAAG developed a program to address the professional development needed to accelerate cultural pluralism. The multi-element program included think tanks, professional development workshops, a website with resources, as well as a mentoring program that matched culturally diverse arts professionals (including Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities) with senior arts leaders. OAAG wanted to benefit individuals, organizations and the public gallery sector with improved ability to integrate culturally diverse values and principles in the processes of public galleries, and improved skills (e.g. in cultural pluralism, governance, HR, partnership development, board relationships, personal skills).

The mentoring program was a key part of this – bringing culturally diverse arts professionals who aspire to senior leadership positions into a confidential one-to-one mentoring relationship with arts leaders within the sector. This would allow for learning tailored to the individual mentoree's skills and knowledge needs. At the same time, OAAG positioned the mentorship opportunity as a reciprocal exchange of information to improve the skills and knowledge of both mentor and mentoree from the lens of cultural pluralism. OAAG offered the mentoring program opportunity to six mentorees who were then teamed with six art gallery sector leaders for a period of 9 – 12 months.

WorkInCulture (WIC), an acknowledged leader in mentorship programming and planning in Ontario's cultural sector, was engaged by OAAG to act as a consultant on the development of the mentoring program and skill needs issues.

Though the Leadership and Cultural Pluralism Program was broader than just mentoring, this report focuses on the mentoring element of the program, WIC's expertise.

### WIC's Role

WorkInCulture was asked to consult on a range of elements within its expertise:

- Development and delivery of the program
- Introduction of basic concepts
- Working with participants to identify skill needs and HR support if needed
- Identify leadership issues for mentors and mentorees as needed
- Conduct an interim check-in with participants
- Consult on tools for evaluating the program
- Report

## **2. Mentoring Activities**

Before the mentoring program actually commenced, OAAG introduced the concept to the gallery sector at a professional development workshop in Kitchener in February 2014. Topics included “Coaching for Performance”, “Designing a Successful Mentoring or Coaching Program”, and “Building a Voluntary Mentoring and Coaching Bank”. WorkInCulture and the Ontario Arts Council as well as the CCI-Presenting Network and the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery made presentations and provided written resources. The presentations confirmed the benefits of mentoring or coaching programs in improving individual and organizational capacities.

WorkInCulture then provided OAAG with all its mentorship materials as a base to draw up a proposed program relevant to the features of the public gallery sector.

A second workshop in March 2014 (“Board Diversity and Adaptive Leadership”) acquainted community leaders with tools and resources for volunteer board development in this area. At a think tank immediately following, OAAG consulted with the participants on cultural diversity, cultural pluralism, gallery leadership and training for leadership, including the first draft of a mentoring program. Not only did OAAG promote the mentoring program there, but the comments of participants also helped make it more relevant to public gallery features and needs.

WIC was involved in the selection of mentorees; consulted with OAAG’s associate director on planning the opening and closing workshops as well as evaluation tools and questions; did a six-month check-in and reviewed whatever final evaluations were in at the end of the program. WIC also offered both mentors and mentorees special access to its online suite of foundational eLearning programs.

The opening workshop for mentors and mentorees (December 2014) included in-depth presentations by consultants (including WIC) on effective mentoring practices and cultural pluralism, and a panel discussion with real-life examples of good mentoring practices from two gallery directors who had participated previously in WorkInCulture’s programs.

OAAG’s mentoring program began to wind down with a closing workshop for all participants in late November 2015. That workshop included a presentation by consultant Judy Wolfe on change management, reminders about how to close down mentorships effectively, opportunities to network and share the learnings from the experience, as well as a chance for the mentoring teams and participants to talk about the future. Participants had a chance to hear directly from each other about the projects they were involved in, what they learned and how they changed. The excitement of those involved was exhilarating.

The end of the program coincided with changes in staff leadership at OAAG and that proved a bit problematic in terms of timing – timetable and deadlines were re-scheduled, and staffing changes and other challenges made it difficult to meet the final program deadlines. As of this writing (five months after the original deadline), OAAG had received four final evaluations from participants – two from mentors and two from mentorees. This

makes it difficult to do a thorough review of the evaluations, and OAAG and WIC have agreed that the report will be based on what has been collected to date. It will allow for modest observations.

### **3. The Mentoring Program**

#### **Participants**

The final six mentoring teams represented a wide range of participants. For the purposes of this program, only one of the 12 requested anonymity.

The mentorees were not just culturally diverse according to the targets OAAG had set, but also diverse in their goals and experience:

1. Suzanne Smoke, a more experienced leader then taking on a new challenge in a small and very local community-based art gallery with both aboriginal and strong local ties
2. Mark V. Campbell, then executive director of the Nia Centre for the Arts. Campbell had a strong academic background but was newer to the public art gallery sector and was involved in creating a community-based facility serving racialized minorities and seeking to expand his curatorial understanding
3. Johnson Ngo, emerging curator, writer and manager, in a junior position at the AGO, seeking experience and clarity in a career path towards leadership
4. Tina Chu, an independent
5. Astrid Ho, print sales manager and archivist at Open Studio, seeking to further her own leadership skills through mentoring at a senior art facility and gallery
6. An employee in a northern community seeking to expand networks and improve understanding of leadership issues and demands

All mentorees were matched with mentors, with some enlisting their own and others being matched by OAAG. Judging from interviews and surveys, this in no way affected the quality of the relationships.

The mentors were equally diverse in their backgrounds, generally culturally diverse themselves and all senior leaders within the community. All agreed to have their names publicized by OAAG and the range of mentors shows the willingness of the community to contribute and give back to their sector and to their colleagues.

1. Naomi Johnson, director of the Woodland Culture Centre
2. Pamela Edmonds, curator/co-director, Third Space Art Projects
3. Emilie Chhangur, assistant director/curator of the Art Gallery of York University
4. Srimoyee Mitra, curator of contemporary arts at the Art Gallery of Windsor
5. Patrick Macaulay, director of Visual Arts at Harbourfront Centre
6. Deepali Dewan, an art historian with a special interest in south Asia, a senior curator at the ROM and a teacher at university

#### **The Projects**

One of the interesting program elements was financial assistance from OAAG to develop and work on a specific project that could bring the issues of cultural pluralism to life while also generating real experience for feedback and discussion with a mentor.

The projects developed over time and sometimes varied considerably from the original proposals. All participants endorsed the supportiveness of OAAG as the projects themselves were transformed and changed as a result of reflecting on actual experience.

The final projects included job shadowing and co-curating an exhibition, working directly with artists on exhibitions, attending important conferences, developing and delivering a workshop on traditional indigenous artistic techniques and independent research into cultural pluralism practices.

#### The website

Once the program was launched, OAAG put considerable efforts into launching a separate website with the goal of providing those working in the public gallery sector access to the information gathered, and of being a vehicle for information exchange. The separate website ([www.ontarioartsleadership.com](http://www.ontarioartsleadership.com)) included information and pictures documenting the projects, the consultants, the participants, the workshops, links and resources.

#### **4. Observations**

With only 4 of 12 final evaluations completed at the time of writing and the program staff completely new, observations are based mostly on interim reports and conversations with some participants. With that understanding, the observations can best be described as modest.

##### **Range of Participants**

OAAG did succeed in reaching its intended target of culturally diverse aspiring leaders.

What was interesting was how the situation of several of these participants changed – three of the six are no longer employed at their organizations and one more has a completely different job that is a step up. Only two are in the same position. It's no criticism to say that this reflects the nature of employment in the sector – contract and short-term jobs as well as burn-out often mean the career path is not as direct as it is in other sectors.

*While the original organizations may not benefit as directly as first anticipated, the participants will continue on their own career path. The skills and networks participants have gained from this program will benefit other organizations as well as the sector as a whole.*

##### **Program Administration**

As it stands now, some 18 months after the start of the mentoring program, the website is still very thinly populated. At best it serves as a record or document of the beginning of the project.

Several mentorees noted that they appreciated the efficiency of OAAG in meeting administrative needs while being flexible in letting projects evolve to reflect learnings. Only one mentoree suggested a “slightly looser attitude to minor changes that might arise” and occasional lack of communication about OAAG not meeting some of its own deadlines.

Still from conversations at the mid-term and one of the final evaluations received to date, some participants suggested it would have been good to have more in-person meetings, creating more of a network. One even suggested mentor-only discussions. At the final workshop, participants also said they would have liked to see other mentorees' projects. These should be considerations for any iteration of the program.

The website was meant to retain information for the sector as a whole and facilitate communication and exchange. But updating its resources and promoting the website as a vehicle for exchange of information requires more in the way of resources and staff than OAAG has presently. Similarly the range of check-ins and the number of program elements should also be considered in terms of their impact on a small staff.

Strategically, these may not be the best use of OAAG efforts and time. *Instead, it might be better to consider how to enhance the network and put less of a burden on the staff by reducing check-in requirements or transforming some of the administrative check-ins into in-person or virtual cohort meetings. It may also be helpful to make better use of partnerships to promote mentoring results and resources or to share the responsibility of administration.*

### Impact on Participants

With only a third of all participants completing a final survey (as of this writing), it is hard to draw clear conclusions about the impact of the program. But the gist of the comments from those surveys and the mid-term surveys certainly speaks to the value of the program.

### Mentors

OAAG wanted to benefit individuals, organizations and the public gallery sector with improved ability to integrate culturally diverse values and principles in the processes of public galleries.

*For mentors, the program allowed them to take time for reflection – an opportunity to consider their roles thoughtfully and to be more articulate about being leaders. Mentorees’ questions helped improve mentors’ understanding of their own jobs and skills and reminded them that sharing ideas and best practices can clarify their own work as well as benefit operations at other organizations.*

*Reflection on the theme of cultural pluralism meant that they reflected on how they put it into practice in their own jobs. This comment about affecting their own job practices suggests that ultimately there could be changes in operations at galleries. On a personal level, as one mentor put it, it “helped me to formulate a *better understanding of what cultural pluralism is and what it means to me in context as a cultural worker*. Also it enabled me to be better engaged and to facilitate open dialogue with all the artists that I work with and to ensure that I can facilitate the need of all the cultural partners I work with.”*

*Another mentor described the value of honing personal skills to benefit her role as a mentor: “I learned to listen carefully to the mentoree’s goals, to tailor activities to those goals and to find ways to build confidence.” But she also felt that she had to find ways to adjust her style to allow the mentoree “to take a leadership role in discussions and create opportunities for reciprocal learning.” It impacted her way of operating as a professional by realizing ‘the importance of having young people work collaboratively at the gallery in general;’ “ it got me to look at my profession and change my routines.” “Finding alternative learning opportunities, new ways of thinking in how a gallery operates” is precisely what mentoring should be about.*

### Mentorees

OAAG wanted to benefit individuals, organizations and the public gallery sector with improved skills (e.g. in cultural pluralism, governance, HR, partnership development,



board relationships, personal skills). In the above section on mentors, we saw how their personal and professional skills benefitted. For the mentorees, similarly their skills and knowledge took leaps forward.

There was no single format, no “cookie cutter” shape, to the mentorship experience and plan. Mentorships took the form they needed to take according to the availability of the team and the skill needs of the mentoree.

*Some mentorees become involved in projects at their mentor’s organization and learned new skills from experience.* Others job shadowed, had the weekly opportunity to be at staff meetings and ask questions, and sometimes to be a member of their mentor’s team. As one mentoree put it in an mid-term conversation, “ I went in thinking I knew what he does, but I’m going to have a huge understanding of a director’s role – learning about overseeing departments, making hard decisions, internal organizational issues and politics, problem-solving and self-awareness.”

*For mentorees, the program’s impact on their confidence was clear.* Occasionally, interim assessments showed the participants as feeling a little less confident about their capacities as a leader and yet in mid-term conversations and from the few final evaluations, it was clear that that was a case of ‘not knowing what they did not know’. As one person said: “I think this is more realistic and accurate.”

Several mentorees in conversations and two in the final evaluations talked about how the attitudes of colleagues changed (one noted “It’s given me new skills and confidence”; another said that at work, he “gained the confidence to speak my mind” and that it changed how his colleagues saw him).

The experience helped one mentoree be more resilient after a job ended (“It gave me a sense of belonging in the sector and encouraged me in a time of self-doubt”), and one mentoree gained a new job, after brainstorming skills and interview techniques with a mentor.

*The program helped mentorees focus on skill development* needs by clarifying the skills needed to be leaders and to manage programs. Three of the mentorees (as well as an OAAG staff member and one of the mentors) took advantage of WIC’s eLearning courses to get a foundation in the range of needed skills. They signed up for:

- business planning
- marketing
- managing finances
- managing projects
- managing people
- planning partnerships
- planning for cultural diversity

At the final workshop, one mentoree shared how important the project management course was becoming to her and looked forward to delving in depth into the subject. Another talked about the range of soft skills you need to make decisions, to manage people and teams, and to engage colleagues in a shared vision.

The most significant impact was on networks – everyone talked about expanding their networks through new contacts at conferences, introductions to new associates, meeting people from outside the city of the country or getting offered new writing commissions. In one conversation, one mentoree put it succinctly: “my network in the visual arts has really exploded through [my mentor].”

Mentorees appreciated the openness of mentors, their willingness to share: “Nothing is too silly for her”, said one. “I have questions about everything.”

## **5. Conclusions**

It is no great stretch to say that the mentoring program demonstrated real value to those involved, to its participants. Learning, connections, networks - all advanced and expanded through the process. The opportunities it gave can benefit the individuals and the work they are involved in.

Promotion of the results and of the value to mentors, not just mentorees, could help to validate the program and make its benefits known more broadly.

What is not as clear is the impact on the sector. The program needs to be continuously available so that other potential mentorees and other generations can take advantage of it. Its success needs to be demonstrated ultimately and over time through documented changes in leadership or operational practice.

Here's where small organizations need to consider how to expand their own capacity to repeat programs such as this and to maximize their impact.

OAAG could consider engaging with partners through PASO (Provincial Arts Service Organizations) or through the cross-sectoral organization WorkInCulture to start a conversation about creating a joint mentoring program. A program that supports mentoring for next generation needs in the whole provincial cultural sector could be very effective by taking advantage of a larger scale to generate funds, create multi-year resources and programs, and impact the public gallery sector and the cultural sector as a whole.