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Practitioner's Essay

Seeds for Succession: A Personal Case Study in Leadership Development and Succession Planning

Leslie A. Ito

Abstract

Leslie A. Ito shares not only her personal journey as she leads her cultural organization through a sudden leadership transition, but the lessons learned through this process.

Introduction

As Asian Pacific American (APA) arts and cultural institutions celebrated their milestone anniversaries in 2005 and 2006—Wing Luke Museum and East West Players, both turned forty and Visual Communications celebrated thirty-five—and the first of the baby boomers begin to turn sixty, the field is faced with the critical issue of leadership transition. Nurturing emerging leaders in the arts has become a hot button issue in the arts and cultural policy field—how is it affecting the Asian Pacific American community? How does the APA arts community nurture new talent, both artists and administrators? Are there enough opportunities in the community for the emerging generation to work side-by-side with established leaders so they are exchanging ideas and knowledge to ensure for smooth transitions? How are we caring for our established leaders in ways that both recognize their contributions to the field while protecting them from burnout?

In the spring of 2003, these questions became deeply personal for me and for Visual Communications. I hope to share this story to encourage others to think about the development of new leaders and planning for the future of our community.

History of Visual Communications

In 1970, concerned Chinese and Japanese American filmmakers, graphic designers, artists, parents, students, and educators in Los Angeles joined together to form Visual Communications, an

organization dedicated to producing Asian American alternative educational materials, books, articles, films and television programs.

During the production process, our founders began searching for visual resources on Asian Pacific American (APA) settlement in the U.S. They used historical photographs to paint a different picture of Asians in America than those portrayed in the media—one that was more accurate. They realized that, in an increasingly media-savvy world, mass communications would be so influential that much of how people saw themselves, their neighbors, and society would be shaped before the first day of school.

“Visual Communications will continue to create meaningful alternatives in media. . . Such alternatives can become instrumental tools for reshaping public consciousness. Media as a social stimulus can connect people’s experiences, serve as an outlet for the vital exchange of ideas and be a means for social change” (VC brochure, circa 1973).

Today, the media is even more influential than our founders could have ever imagined and the organization’s mission has changed to meet these needs. Visual Communications’ current mission is to promote intercultural understanding through the presentation, preservation and support of media works by and about Asian Pacific Americans. Visual Communications serves the Asian Pacific American community with the understanding that media and the arts are important vehicles to organize and empower communities, build connections between generations, challenge perspectives, and create an environment for critical thinking, necessary to build a more just and humane society.

Understanding and meeting the needs of the APA communities are essential to our mission. The Southern California APA community speaks over thirty different languages and represents more than twenty-five cultures. With this understanding, the organization not only strives to produce and promote honest, sensitive portrayals of APAs, but also to take part in developing an informed community. In order to serve this diverse constituency, Visual Communications is involved in four key programmatic areas:

- ⊗ The VC Academy—Specializing in media literacy education and training for youth and senior citizens.
- ⊗ Artist Services—Supporting and providing assistance to creative projects by individuals and organizations, from

concept development to the final edit; and providing workshops and seminars for professional filmmakers.

- ⊗ VC Presentation—Exhibiting new and groundbreaking work at various venues, including the annual VC Filmfest: The Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival.
- ⊗ VC Collections—Maintaining and preserving one of the largest photographic and moving image archives on the Asian Pacific experience in America.

Through these four programs, Visual Communications touches the lives of thousands of people—artists, audiences, and supporters of the arts—each year.

An Asian American Pacific Media Arts Center

In 1993, I was first introduced to Visual Communications and the field of arts administration through the Getty Grant Program’s Multicultural Undergraduate Summer Internship. I spent ten eye-opening weeks at Visual Communications and was exposed to many important ideas that would eventually impact my life in ways that I could never imagine at the age of eighteen. This was the summer I learned about the information superhighway, arts advocacy, the arts as a potential career option, and developing myself as a leader. Linda Mabalot, the organization’s Executive Director, made a great impact on my life that summer. Linda planted a seed—that the arts and the Asian American community would become a passion, and most notably that Visual Communications would become my home.

Linda had made a lifetime commitment to Visual Communications. She not only helped to develop and nurture Visual Communications into the organization that it is today, but was also a Filipina filmmaker. Linda had an incredibly keen sense of upcoming talent, working closely with young filmmakers and community members she deemed as “good people,” but more importantly as having the right balance of creativity and the ability to manage risks and work the system—all skills that Linda had learned while on the job and that I would learn in years to come.

For the next ten years, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to intern at several more arts organizations across the country including the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, Japanese American National Museum, and the Smithsonian Insti-

tution's Asian Pacific American Program. As I built up my resume and sharpened my skills at large museums and performing arts centers, I continued to keep in touch with Visual Communications because it was one of the few organizations able to stay true to its ongoing mission and values.

Linda and I would get together at least once a year for lunch. She would check in to see how I was doing, keeping up with my interests, and tracking my growth as an arts administrator. And I would do the same, following the direction that VC was moving. My meetings with Linda were helpful to both of us—brainstorming new ideas for my career as well as the future of the organization. In a sense, these meetings (I am sure I was not the only one who lunched with Linda) were Linda's astute way of cultivating new leaders by understanding our needs, encouraging us to develop our talents and pursue a lifetime career in the arts that would eventually lead us back to Visual Communications.

Linda herself had benefited from many leadership development programs. One that had a significant impact on her personal growth as a young woman was Upward Bound, which invested in disadvantaged youth to prepare for college. This program changed the course of Linda's life and more importantly, demonstrated that a little encouragement and direction could influence young people in positive ways.

In the Fall of 2000, upon returning from a two-year fellowship at the Ford Foundation's Media, Arts and Culture Division in New York, I moved to Los Angeles and reconnected with Visual Communications. One of the goals of the Ford Foundation's fellowship was to give young people the rare opportunity to see the inner-workings of a private foundation with hopes that they would take this information back to the field. I was eager to share what I had learned at one of the nation's largest private foundations about grantmaking, but also best practices on program development, strategic planning, infrastructure building, and board development.

I started out as a volunteer for Visual Communications' thirtieth Anniversary celebration; Linda then hired me, part-time, as a grantwriter. I was subsequently hired full-time when we were awarded the New Voices Fellowship, a national leadership development program that helps nonprofit organizations recruit or retain innovative, new talent. As one component of the Fellowship

program, Linda and I were to take part in a formal mentoring relationship.

Although the mentorship was informal, it was definitely productive and helped plant the seeds for an unexpected leadership transition. Linda was a model mentor in that she was willing to give up responsibilities to help me learn and allowed me to make mistakes. My first years at Visual Communications were spent developing new programs and finding funding. When conceptualizing projects, like our Armed with a Camera Fellowship Program, she was enthusiastic and supportive. However, she allowed me enough room for success and failure in order for me to grow from the process. The Fellowship program began as training for activists to learn video documentation skills, but we quickly learned that organizers and activists had little time to do actual documenting. Subsequently, the program transformed into a fellowship to support emerging Asian Pacific American media artists, with preference given to those who explored social justice issues.

As the primary grantwriter for the organization, not only was I able to use my previous experience, but I was also able to pick up one of Linda's responsibilities so that she could concentrate on board development. Linda understood the need for a strong and diverse board that would reflect the Asian Pacific American community and meet the needs of a field that was changing so quickly. In 2002, Linda added a new cohort of board members that complemented the original group by adding younger members whose range of expertise included philanthropy, marketing, student services, and the entertainment industry.

Linda also knew that we could learn from each other. After spending time at the Ford Foundation, I was used to talking about process. "What is the system?" I would ask her regarding everything from ticketing to program development. She would look at me with her eyebrows raised and her eyes opened wide; then throw her head back and laugh, "system?!" I would then draw upon my experiences at the Ford Foundation and test my ideas on how to get the organization to run more effectively and efficiently. Linda and I worked closely over my two-year fellowship on strengthening the organizational infrastructure, fundraising plans, and programming issues and she continued to encourage me to develop my leadership skills, including attending the National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture's Media Arts Leadership Institute

(MALI). MALI helped my professional development and, more importantly, helped me learn about other media arts organizations and connect with other media arts workers.

During this period, she was not only cultivating me but also bringing in other “young bloods” as she referred to us, adding fresh perspectives and a renewed energy. Most importantly, she was building a multigenerational team, both on the board as well as on staff, that valued innovation while continuing to recognize the history of the organization and the APA community. Linda knew that with new leaders comes new programming and artists, audiences, donors, and volunteers. Visual Communications began to see a significant change in the generational demographics of our constituents at all levels—something that many organizations our age strive for but for whom the transition is much slower. We began to see a significant shift in our VC Filmfest audience where approximately 40 percent of our attendees were between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-nine.

At every step of the way, Linda generously shared her knowledge, experience and passion. And yet, as she chain-smoked away, she never sugarcoated the difficulties she faced as a leader of a media arts organization. Everyday, I witnessed the realities of being an executive director. I took notes hoping someday I would reach my professional goal of leading an arts organization. Little did I know that my dream of becoming an executive director would come much sooner than expected.

In the spring of 2004, Linda was not feeling well. She was struggling to concentrate at work, which was not in character for someone who had relentlessly spent seventeen years building the organization with passion and perseverance. She took some time off to take care of her health. At the time, we had thought she suffered from carpal tunnel, a common condition for someone who spent as much time as she did on the computer. Just three weeks away from our nineteenth Annual VC Filmfest in 2003, Linda had still not returned to the office. The Festival team continued to plug away at launching the Festival until a day and half before Opening Night, when we found out she was diagnosed with cancer. Linda was hospitalized where she spent less than a month before passing away at the age of forty-nine.

My last visit with Linda was much like the lunches we used to have, only this time I was the one reporting on what was hap-

pening at VC. I fed her stewed prunes in between words of encouragement that things were going well at the office and stories of success from the just completed film festival. I told her not to worry, to concentrate on getting better. Sensing that this might be the last time I would see her, I asked her for advice, hoping she would share some more wisdom. She looked at me and laughed a big, hearty Linda laugh that must have taken up all her energy. My translation of her answer to my serious question was “find the humor in every situation.” She had already planted the seeds for succession and knew that the only thing to do now was to let them grow.

The transition period from Linda’s death until we hired a new executive director lasted almost seven months. A hiring committee made up of both board and staff members worked tirelessly on developing a job description for a position that had been held for over seventeen years and had suddenly been vacated. The process of writing a job description helped us to envision not only the kind of leader we wanted for the organization, but also the type of organization we wanted to be. In the interim, I was appointed Acting Executive Director. I ensured that the executive search was still on schedule while the Committee determined what kind of director they were looking for by outlining core competences. Although Linda had invested in my leadership development, I knew the importance of conducting a nationwide search for the next leader to ensure that we hired the right candidate for the job.

In January 2004, after a nationwide search and formal interview process, I was named the new Executive Director of Visual Communications. My vision for the organization included reaching underserved communities in Asian Pacific America, including Southeast and South Asian Americans, and also to continue the groundwork Linda began to develop a new generation of artists, audiences, and donors. Being promoted to this position after being at the organization for two years helped to cut down on the learning curve; however, inheriting an organization with a thirty-four year history and a legacy of strong community support and being myself, barely over thirty, was a lot of pressure. This was, moreover, probably the most difficult time financially to manage a mid-size arts organization, especially in California. Our Golden State is investing, annually, less than three cents per person in the arts where the national average is \$1.10 with New York at \$2.75.

Yet, ironically, as I waded through the file boxes full of Linda's old notes, I realized this crisis was nothing new, that she too had gone through the "drop everything and advocate for the arts" days. I have inherited her struggles but hope that I can solve them in new ways.

Although I sometimes wish for a few more moments with Linda to ask for advice, I know she would only laugh and expect me to figure it out myself. Fortunately, Linda has left me with many supporters whom I rely on as my "Cabinet of Advisors." When I need a partner to brainstorm innovative marketing ideas I call Jerry Yoshitomi, former Executive Director of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center or, when I have public broadcast questions, I email staff at the Center for Asian American Media. The list goes on and on and I realize that I have an amazing network of support.

Although Linda's death was unexpected and the organization had no formal succession plan, Linda had already begun to put one into practice by nurturing new leaders in the organization, passing on knowledge and responsibilities, strengthening the board of directors, and ensuring the organization had a core base of members and artists that were passionate about VC's mission and in line with its values—all key components to a leadership transition.

However, our transition has been far from smooth. Although Linda was not a founding executive director (Visual Communications was founded by four media artists as a collective), the organization did suffer from some post-"founder" symptoms. We were challenged by everything from trying to navigate the financial systems since Linda had many of the numbers in her head to following up with key funders and assuring them that the organization was in good hands. It has taken coordinated efforts by both the board and staff to move the organization forward. Mourning Linda's passing and adjusting to the loss of her contagious energy and passion was difficult for everyone. But we realized that we must continue her vision and plan for the future of the organization.

This leadership transition provided an opportunity for us to take Linda's vision and build upon it. In August 2004, we began our planning process, which has helped us both identify our challenges and strategize new directions. The document that emerged continues to guide our policies and practices towards a stronger, more vibrant organization.

Although Visual Communications' leadership transition is unique, leadership succession is a reality that the field and our community must face and the planning process behind it is critical. And yet, as we learned at Visual Communications, there is only so much we can plan for because life is unpredictable. To that end, we must plant seeds for succession in order to keep the Asian Pacific American community strong.

Recommendations

Leadership transition is an inevitable process that every organization must face, particularly as we see the first generation of arts and cultural leaders of organizations founded in the 1970s and 1980s nearing retirement. Changes in leadership challenge Asian Pacific Americans to take a proactive stance in developing our next generation of leaders, in addition to caring for the health and welfare of the pioneers. To this end, Asian Pacific Americans have an opportunity to shape the future of our arts and cultural organizations through leadership development efforts.

The following are key recommendations for organizations towards succession planning and leadership development based on our experiences at Visual Communications:

- ⊗ Identifying New Leaders—take note of that talented intern or that special volunteer. Perhaps with a little encouragement and more professional training, this person could become a great addition to your staff. Identifying new leaders means seeking out those who display a passion, an openness to learning and a commitment to building a career in the arts and culture field.
- ⊗ Mentoring—or developing new leaders both on a field-wide level as well as an organizational level is a key component to leadership succession. As a community, we must cultivate the next generation of leaders and we must invest in their future. This investment can range from creating effective programs to developing leadership skills. It might include individual actions such as having a junior staff member shadow a more established leader with the intent of passing on knowledge and responsibilities. Further, contrary to traditional top-down mentorships, knowledge and expertise can be shared in both directions.
- ⊗ Creating Leadership Opportunities—the success of identifying and mentoring new leaders can only be

measured when they are given the opportunity to lead. As administrators, taking a step aside to allow others to gain experience is part of the transference of both knowledge and practice.

- ⊗ Strategic planning is a key component for succession. As organizations envision their future three to five years ahead they should be continually assessing how the organization is transferring knowledge and building leadership. Although planning for succession takes time and resources that are often a luxury for small to mid-sized arts organizations, a plan will help determine steps towards a smooth transition. In addition, succession can be a sensitive topic for an organization whose leader envisions him/herself as a permanent and irreplaceable part of the organization; however, when addressed within the context of a strategic plan, succession becomes part of the larger blueprint for the organization's future. The Illinois Arts Alliance's Planning for Succession Tool Kit, a resource for step-by-step leadership transition, was an extremely helpful resource for Visual Communications.

In addition to these recommendations for organizations and the field, foundations and other funding agencies should also continue to support programs that provide younger professionals and practitioners with the opportunity to intern and gain additional experience. Providing these opportunities through fully funded leadership training and mentorship programs can make a significant impact on the future of our field and on the formation of next generation of leadership.

Finally, the younger generation of leaders needs to be committed not only to acquiring skills and experience for leadership, but also to learning the history of our community, organizations, and the foundations laid by our predecessor. As the next generation, we also need to work side-by-side with established leaders to ensure that they can retire with proper benefits and to create post-retirement roles for them to keep connected to the organization.

There is never a good time to plan for succession—whether it be in crisis or in times of relative stability. However, taking these steps to begin developing leadership within our organizations and the larger community will help ensure that Asian Pacific American cultural institutions will continue to flourish and serve our communities.

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