

Leading Through Funding Uncertainty

Strategic Guidance for Arts & Culture Organizations Navigating Funding Uncertainty

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The uncertainty surrounding arts and culture funding right now is weighing heavily on many organizations, leaders, and teams. Beyond the financial realities, these moments often carry an emotional toll as well - balancing mission, staff wellbeing, programming, community impact, and long-term sustainability all at once.

If you are navigating difficult conversations, increased pressure, or uncertainty about what comes next, you are certainly not alone. Many organizations across the field are trying to determine how to move forward thoughtfully while continuing to care for both their people and their mission.

While every organization's realities, resources, and communities are different, moments like these can benefit from slowing reactive decision-making and creating space for reflection, prioritization, communication, and strategic grounding.

The intention of this resource is not to offer a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather to provide a few supportive guideposts for nonprofit leaders, staff teams, and boards as you navigate uncertainty and begin thinking through what comes next.

1. Pause Reactive Decision-Making

Not every immediate cut is strategic.

In moments of uncertainty, organizations often feel pressure to react quickly. While some immediate adjustments may be necessary, decisions made from panic or urgency can sometimes create longer-term instability.

Before making major operational shifts, it may be helpful to pause and assess:

- What functions, programs, or roles are truly mission-critical?
- Which decisions are immediate, and which can wait for additional clarity?
- What short-term adjustments could create breathing room without causing long-term damage?
- Are there multiple financial scenarios being considered, rather than preparing only for the worst-case outcome?

Leadership teams and boards do not need to have all the answers immediately. Creating space for thoughtful planning can help organizations move from reaction into strategy.

2. Strengthen Internal Communication

Silence creates fear and assumptions.

During uncertain periods, communication becomes one of the most important leadership tools an organization has.

When information is limited, staff, boards, and stakeholders often fill gaps with assumptions - increasing anxiety, confusion, and disconnection. Even when leaders do not yet have clear answers, consistent and transparent communication can help create stability.

Consider:

- Establishing regular communication rhythms with staff and boards
- Sharing what is known, what is still uncertain, and when updates may come
- Creating opportunities for questions and dialogue
- Aligning board and staff messaging to avoid confusion or mixed signals

Clear communication cannot eliminate uncertainty, but it can help reduce isolation and build trust during difficult moments.

3. Reassess Capacity Before Adding More Pressure

Organizations cannot “stretch” indefinitely.

Many nonprofit teams are already operating at or beyond capacity. In moments of funding uncertainty, organizations often respond by asking remaining staff to absorb even more responsibility.

While flexibility is part of nonprofit work, prolonged overextension can lead to burnout, disengagement, and long-term operational strain.

This may be a useful moment to evaluate:

- Which responsibilities are sustainable, and which are creating ongoing strain?
- Where are leadership or operational bottlenecks emerging?
- What work requires dedicated ownership versus temporary support?
- Are there flexible or interim models of support that could help stabilize capacity during transition periods?

Protecting organizational sustainability also means protecting the people carrying the work forward.

4. Re-engage Boards Strategically

Boards should help stabilize, not amplify panic.

Boards play a critical role during periods of uncertainty. At their best, boards can provide steadiness, advocacy, strategic thinking, and partnership with leadership.

This may be an important time to revisit:

- Board roles and expectations
- Communication pathways between board and staff leadership
- Fundraising and advocacy responsibilities
- How the board can support organizational stability rather than unintentionally increasing pressure

Clear alignment between leadership and boards becomes especially important when organizations are navigating difficult decisions and heightened stress.

5. Focus on Sustainability, Not Just Survival

Long-term resilience requires more than short-term cuts.

While immediate financial realities may require difficult choices, organizations also benefit from keeping long-term sustainability in view.

Moments of disruption can create opportunities to reassess:

- operational structure
- staffing models
- leadership capacity
- partnerships
- board engagement
- revenue diversification
- organizational priorities

The goal is not simply to “get through” uncertainty, but to consider what structures and practices will allow organizations to remain healthy, sustainable, and mission-aligned over time.

Before rushing into solutions or difficult decisions, it may be helpful to pause - to reflect, reconnect with priorities, and create space for thoughtful conversation within your leadership team and board.

Questions for Reflection

- What decisions feel urgent, and which may be emotionally reactive?
 - Where is our organization currently experiencing the greatest strain or uncertainty?
 - What support do staff and leadership need in order to remain sustainable through this period?
 - How can the board contribute to stability, clarity, and partnership right now?
 - What opportunities exist to strengthen long-term sustainability, even amid short-term uncertainty?
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Closing Reflection

What many nonprofit and arts leaders are carrying right now extends far beyond budgets alone. These moments often require leaders to navigate uncertainty while continuing to support staff, boards, communities, programming, and mission - all at the same time.

Having spent many years inside nonprofit and arts leadership myself, I understand how isolating and overwhelming these periods can feel. One of the reasons I now do this work from a strategic support perspective is because I understand the value of having space to pause, assess priorities, and think through challenges with someone who understands the realities of the field from both operational and leadership experience.

There is no single roadmap for navigating moments like these, and every organization's realities and needs are different. Sometimes the most valuable next move is simply creating space for thoughtful conversation, reflection, and strategic grounding before moving into reactive decision-making.

If it would be helpful, I'm glad to offer a limited number of informal strategic support conversations for arts and culture leaders navigating funding uncertainty, organizational strain, or transition.

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