

Module 6: Helping Leaders Value Artists

Hello. I am Keya Crenshaw from Black Chick Media, LLC, an online creative consulting company based in Columbus, Ohio. I will be your instructor for Module Six: Helping Leaders Value Artists. By the end of this module, we will have investigated practical strategies for negotiating and advocating for artists with apprehensive executive leaders and supervisors, and researched new support programs and approaches. You will learn how to be strategic in communicating needs to meet programmatic goals, demonstrate the value of individual artists, articulate tangible needs from leaders, and how to connect community goals with the mission of the organization for effective results. In turn, you will be able to articulate your position and artists' importance in the creative ecosystem.

LESSON ONE – How to be Strategic in Communicating Needs to Meet Programmatic Goals

Sometimes we have great programs and strategies we want to implement, but we might hit some roadblocks from our supervisors who may not understand our goals. Working with administrators, bosses, supervisors, presidents and executives who do not see our intentions as being in alignment with the mission and objectives of the organization can be extremely frustrating. This module is not about fixing bad bosses or adversarial supervisors. That is a matter you will need to work with your organization's Human Resources department to address. The next few lessons are to help you effectively communicate with administrators and avoid misunderstandings. Positive and effective communication, whatever your job, is possible if you are deliberate in your goals and objectives. Here are three points for you to become a more strategic communicator.

First, prepare for meetings. Develop a plan and outline based on the goals for your program, outreach, and community engagement. Make sure you invite your direct supervisors to be a part of the planning stage and encourage them to help you during implementation. Often, when we are spearheading projects, we forget to include the vision(s) of those who have tasked us with said assignments, which can then lead to (avoidable) misunderstandings. Make sure everyone involved understands the task at hand, as well as the time commitment, employees involved, and expectations.

For example, you have a meeting planned because you want to create a monthly Art and Disability workshop series. Your Executive Director also has a background in Disability Services. Ask your supervisor what are some do's and don'ts artists and those assisting artists with disabilities should be mindful of when navigating the art world?

This is an opportunity to not only ask your Executive Director to present to local artists and forge a better relationship with community artists, but also for you to build a relationship with your Executive Director. This will build trust, which is important. You will also have an “ask” that requires the Executive Director to defer to your opinion. Additionally, when meeting with supervisors and other staff members, make sure you always have a way to take notes, and bring information about your program, who you plan to serve, and a budget to the table. This will build trust and show interest. Agendas are great as well because they help us stay on task, allow us to remember to ask for what we need, and make sure important material is covered.

While we may wish our supervisors to be involved, it may be the case that they are unable or unwilling to help in these ways. If so, request check-in/catch up meetings and conversations to make sure all involved are on the same page. And keep in mind, when speaking to your staff or bosses, never be accusatory or terse. This will only create tension. I have found it is best to speak directly to the person, if possible, regarding any concerns, then follow up with a clarification email for your records.

Second, multiple forms of communication are important. In this digital age, we often communicate via technology; but don't rely on it too heavily. For example, in a crisis situation, email isn't always the best option. Emails can often go undelivered or end up in junk mail or spam folders. In addition, your unwillingness to face an issue head-on may cause issues with your staff and supervisors. For example, if you are planning an event, and the featured speaker does not show up, would sending them an email in that moment be the best option? Perhaps not. You could possibly avoid this scenario altogether by confirming with the guest the week and day before. If they are still a no show, having their phone number on hand would be best so that you can call or text them. As a rule, when you establish a relationship with clients (for example, the speaker), get all of their contact information upfront and store in a place where you can easily and quickly access it, such as your phone or a virtual file storage site like Google Drive or Dropbox.

Another option might be to reach out to your boss and support staff; perhaps one of them would be able to speak on the guest's behalf if they know early enough in advance. However, not taking action, or only sending an email, could not only put your organization in a bad light, but could also demonstrate to your staff and supervisors that you aren't as prepared as you should be. We want to make sure to prevent that.

A successful communication strategy is to encourage your place of employment to focus on employee to direct supervisor face-to-face communication. In addition to

meetings and phone calls, utilizing an internal company communication service (like Slack, HipChat and other Internet Relay Chat, or IRC services), are great tools to increase and encourage employee relations, while improving peer-to-peer or horizontal communications. With programs that connect workers at all levels (or vertical communications) each individual is empowered with a voice on issues or topics that matter to him or her.

Third, it may seem simple, but say what you need. While we all believe our voices deserve to be heard and our ideas considered, there are effective ways to communicate that do not involve aggression, being pushy, or force. Let your higher-ups know what you need to be an effective employee, what tools would help you complete your assignments, and endeavor to keep them up to date at all times — whether they are responsive or not. The latter will come in handy when it comes to employee review time, as well as if any concerns arise.

Always have a communications trail. For example, make a yearly plan for yourself as an employee highlighting what you would like to accomplish. Jot down what you will need and how you can go about acquiring the right tools. It may range from special trainings to materials. Present this plan to your higher-ups. If they're not responsive, ask them their thoughts and how you can change your outline to better serve the company. Additionally, I like to keep folders in my work and personal email account and save all work correspondence, including my work goals.

Activity

Read Forbes' article "[The Strategic Narrative: A Better Way To Communicate Change](#)" and the HubSpot article "[How to Communicate with Your Creatives without Killing Their Creativity](#)" and use them to inform this lesson's activity.

You are meeting with your boss because you want to create a monthly workshop series on a topic that is important to you. Choose one of the following for this activity: Art and Disability, Creative Entrepreneurship, or Supporting K-12 through Art Education. Is there another topic that you have been considering? Feel free to use it for this exercise. Now consider these approaches to communicating this topic to the rest of your organization: How would you present the workshop? How would you align the objectives of the workshop series to the mission and goals of your organization? What would you ask your staff? What would you ask of your boss? What information would you take with you to the meeting? How would you ensure program goals are met? What method of evaluation will you use? Take a few minutes to outline a meeting agenda.

LESSON TWO – Articulate Tangible Needs to Leaders

In the first module, we discussed several ways to maintain open communication with your boss. In this lesson, we will dig deeper into ways you can let your supervisors know what you need as an employee. When working with clients or in a nonprofit or corporate setting, I always like to start meetings by asking what is needed from me as an employee, and how I can best serve the company. I also endeavor to maintain a list of all projects completed and in progress. This allows both parties to stay on schedule and informed. When going into these settings, I like to keep a couple of approaches in mind.

One, be open. In an ideal world, employees and employers would get along 100% of the time. Of course, this can't always be true. Ask for an open door policy or implement one yourself. While someone's position may give them the title of leader, we all have different strengths and weaknesses that may prevent us from being the most effective. Leaders are not immune to those weaknesses. In short, they may not know how to articulate needs or communicate. This is an opportunity for you to teach effective communication through demonstration. Show them what tools you need to be successful. Do you require a calendar to stay on task? Create one and share. Most calendar applications like Outlook and Gmail have sharable calendars where members can view and edit. Do you require specific data or community statistics to do your job? Is your boss unwilling to share or has data simply never been gathered? Use a survey builder like SurveyMonkey or TypeForms to show how the organization can better engage its constituents. In other words, don't be afraid to take the lead!

Two, prepare for the worst. Sometimes, no matter what you do, it can seem as if your goals and the objectives of your supervisor are not in alignment. This has the potential to ultimately strain your working relationship. However, before you jump to conclusions about your supervisor's intentions and motives, make sure you know what kind of supervisor you are working with. This process can be laborious and emotionally draining. Finding a place of compromise often requires proof of the strained relationship through the electronic communication you have tracked and support from someone above your direct supervisor. For example, do they lack leadership skills? This may be evident when they continuously give you work they seem unwilling or unable to do themselves. Are they not able to offer direction, especially when you need it the most? This may be evinced when you ask questions about processes or goals and your supervisor defers or seems completely uninterested. You can address this by asking how they envision program goals and what is important to them as an organization

leader. Explain that you would like to have an amicable working relationship in order to achieve necessary company goals and community outreach efforts.

If you are still finding that you and your supervisor and/or staff are not on the same page, support from someone above your direct supervisor will be important for successful mediation. If you feel you have attempted to create or increase positive communication efforts and are constantly met with resistance such as refusal to lead, lack of interest in your efforts, consistent negative feedback, or aggression, you may need to seek assistance from a company leader, board of directors, or outside mediator. Outside mediators come in handy when help cannot be sought from all levels of executive administration, including Human Resources.

Activity

Read Forbes' article "[How To Handle A Bad Boss: 7 Strategies For 'Managing Up'](#)" and The Guardian's "[What to do if you have a difficult boss](#)" before beginning the following exercise:

Take a few minutes to think of one to two instances where communication could have been improved between you and your supervisor. What would you do differently? What steps would you take to increase positive relations? How would you endeavor to have more effective interactions? Write out how you start the conversation. What do you do if your supervisor is not receptive? If your supervisor is receptive to your needs, what are your next steps? Make sure your needs are for the company, as well as your career. Start with something positive. Next, state your critique. Then, end with something positive. For example, consider the following: "I really appreciate how you have an open door policy and I can come to you about any needs I may have regarding our community programs. With that, I need support for my work by receiving direction and feedback with regards to my work. This is essential to our organization's success goals and it will help me identify how I can best serve the organization."

LESSON THREE – Demonstrate the Value of Creative Communication

Today, creative workplace solutions and workforce interactions are becoming more prevalent in the corporate and nonprofit sectors. This means, new ways of thinking and managing are now required because of the diversity in education, skills, and experiences (both professional and personal) that come together in employment sectors. One of the great things about this employment sector shift is that there is no longer one unified or standard way of thinking, managing, or communicating, and issues that may arise can be dealt with in new ways. For instance, where one person sees a dire problem, another may see a creative solution. However, problem solving and other interactions can be difficult for those who have not taken on this new way of thinking and employee-job relations. Again, if you're unsure about what signs to look for when dealing with staff, make sure your employer values your different outlook, appreciates what you bring to the table, and supports your hard work. To highlight your creative talents and outlook, you should develop a new project or suggest a new process or office system with a creative twist. Not only does this show you are thinking of the future of the company, but it will show the executive administration you have ideas and goals.

To assist apprehensive staff or bosses in adopting a creative outlook and embracing differences, invite your office to volunteer for a local arts organization and/or have an art 'open house' at your company. If there is space to do so, encourage the administration to purchase and hang local art. These are small steps towards advocating for the acceptance of new perspectives and ideas that can raise office morale and encourage healthy communication.

Activity

Read The Huffington Post article "[Creatives in Cubicles: Creatives in the Non-Creative Workplace](#)," the Fortune article "[Why creativity is absolutely crucial in the workplace](#)," and the allBusiness piece "[The Importance of Creativity in the Workplace](#)."

Think of a process, system, or company standard that needs to be restructured or redeveloped. Write down how you would present this to your boss and company, making sure to include both risks and benefits. Then, interview two members of the executive administration at your organization. Ask them about their vision for the company, and how you and your work fits in. Let them know you have great ideas and you would like their support and guidance.

LESSON FOUR: Connecting Community Goals with the Mission of the Organization for Effective Results

As stated earlier in this module, it is a good idea to gather data regarding the communities your organization serves. Only then will you be able to begin to address their wants and needs. If you provide professional development workshops, you'll need to survey your audiences to know what classes to provide. Sample survey questions could be: What professional tools do you need to be successful? How can we as an organization help you reach your goals? What times of the day are best for you to attend workshops and events? In the span of one (1) month, how frequently would you be able to attend professional development workshops? Make sure you check your surveys often and compile the data. Also, brainstorm how you can consider the respondents whose answers may not fall within the majority—those outliers whose input is equally valuable. As community members and potential advocates, they should be considered as well.

If one does not exist, create a Community Objectives Tool Box. Tool boxes help you get a quick start on key activities in community work. The [Community Tool Box](#) website offers great resources. Your tool box depends upon your goals and objectives. For example, if you're building leadership, you need to develop a plan, assess competencies, envision what you need the leadership to do, select methods, and recruit.

Seek community volunteers, or partner with other business to reach your company goals. The Ideal volunteer is passionate about your organization and always professional. They are results driven, consistent, and energized. Encourage community members to volunteer by offering free admission to an otherwise expensive event, thanking them both verbally and in print, and giving them a small gift of appreciation. This is another opportunity where you can lead and show your supervisors you possess leadership and managerial skills. Treat this like any other job or skills building opportunity.

Even if your company already has a solid mission statement, there is no harm in reviewing it and articulating how you can best implement strategies. This is especially important if your strategies and programming ideas may appear to be non-traditional to the organization. Don't try to take on the world individually at your organization. Ask coworkers if they'd like to create committees or share the responsibilities of implementing new strategies.

Activity

Review the Community Toolbox exercise [Proclaiming Your Dream: Developing Vision and Mission Statements](#) and the Cooperative Extension Publication "[Vision, Mission, Goals & Objectives...Oh My!](#)"

Then take a few minutes to develop a mock community survey. This is a great opportunity to gauge interest for new and creative programming that you would like to introduce. Make sure that your questions reference your company's mission and goals along with the need of the community. How will you present this information to your supervisors? What are your end goals? Take your draft to a few trusted co-workers for input and contributions.

Congratulations! You have now completed Module Six. Proceed to the quiz to see how much you learned. Again, I'm Keya Crenshaw with Black Chick Media, and it was great hanging out with you!