



A former dancer, Reagan Messer, executive director of MoCo Arts in Keene, is no stranger to the barre being practiced on by ballet dancers Sarah Foucher, front, and Maude Warshaw, rear, at the studio in Keene. According to Messer, the successful management of a nonprofit organization requires five key elements.



# Five keys of successful nonprofit management

BY REAGAN MESSER / PHOTO BY BILL GNADE

When I became the executive director of MoCo Arts, it was a nonprofit organization in transition. The former ED had retired after 14 years, the interim leadership was not a good fit, debt was substantial and the staff was not working as a fully developed team.

Nonetheless, there was plenty of good news. MoCo was an established family-centered nonprofit arts education organization in downtown Keene, offering more than 65 classes each week for children in dance and theater, and award-winning multi-arts camps on vacation weeks and in the summer. The art educators were highly-regarded, the programs were exceptional, the performances consistently magical, and MoCo enjoyed an excellent, albeit limited, reputation in the community. In other words, we had a great product, but a lot of work ahead to ensure MoCo's future.

Over a 28-year professional career, I have

seen the inner workings of nonprofit arts management from many perspectives – as a dancer, soloist and union rep for the Boston Ballet, as well as artistic advisor for two dance companies and a member of the board of directors for another. At MoCo Arts, I have been a teacher, choreographer and am now in the dual role of artistic director of dance and the executive director. Recently, we have navigated through the transition, corrected our course, created a high-functioning management team, maintained excellence in arts education, created meaningful collaborations with other organizations, enabling some of the most vulnerable in our community to experience the thrill of growing in the arts and substantially increased program enrollment.

I believe there are five key elements that are essential to successful nonprofit management: A clear mission, effective teamwork, community development, strong fiscal oversight and an excellent product.

**Mission:** Some nonprofits pay inadequate attention to their mission. They devote a lot of time to developing a mission statement, but don't ensure that the mission is a living, breathing part of the daily life of their work. MoCo has a great mission: "transforming lives through movement and creative expression," and we *see* transformations in our studios every day.

In order to achieve a mission, the organization's staff and board need to truly believe in it and allow it to be a guiding force. An organization should also consistently ask the question "Are we fulfilling our mission?" So, in our case, "Are we truly *transforming* lives?" And, each time a new program idea arises, "Are we overstepping our mission boundaries?" I believe nonprofit mission management and fulfillment is the key first step to success.

**Teamwork:** A strong, passionate and committed team is the only path to excellence.

FIVE KEYS CONTINUED ON PAGE 25



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Many nonprofits flounder because of staff dissatisfaction stemming from lack of support, poor communication and limited opportunity to participate in decision-making. Overwork can be an issue as well, though most who choose a nonprofit career realize that they will be required to push up their sleeves on a regular basis, taking on whatever task needs to get done, even if it is not in their job description.

However, enough cannot be said about hiring the right people for the job. Otherwise, staffing mistakes can create major difficulties at the team table. At MoCo, the staff is involved in the selection of new team members. I want the team to be sure about new hires.

A nonprofit organization must also have open communication between board and staff. In the traditional business model, the board communicates to the CEO and then he or she takes it to the staff. Under some circumstances this is necessary, but should not become the norm. This leads to a separation that is unhealthy for the organization. A successful nonprofit must foster teamwork and manage an open relationship between board and staff in order to achieve its goals.

Respect and appreciation for the talents of staff and volunteers are major components of a successful nonprofit team.

**Community Development:**

While considering community development, a nonprofit needs to recognize its internal constituents as well as its external constituents. The first thing to consider is the internal community – at MoCo this is our board, staff, students and their families. A hallmark of our organization is the accessible, welcoming, inclusive, supportive and encouraging environment that is a critical to our success. The children and families we serve are our ambassadors and need to be nurtured, as such.

Next, we consider our external community relationship. This extends to our donors, other nonprofits and businesses, schools, friends, neighbors and audiences. We cannot survive without their support, therefore we make every effort to communicate, cultivate and

collaborate with these players on a consistent basis. In effect, we say, “Who should be at the table with us? Who is missing?” While looking at community partners, we always remember the mission and ask, “Do they align with our organization?”

We are fortunate to have extraordinary testimonials available to us and use both traditional and emerging media to share these stories with the community. These efforts spread our mission throughout the region, attracting new students into our programs, new donors and new audience members at our performances.

**Fiscal Oversight:** Every nonprofit needs strong fiscal management and an active, en-

couraged and empowered to participate in the fundraising efforts of the organization. While not every member of our team is involved in the financial aspects of fundraising, everyone participates in some aspect, bringing their own resources and skills to further the mission of the organization. Board and staff members are now held accountable for the financial decisions MoCo makes as an organization.

It truly takes a united organizational team to oversee the bottom line and to raise the money needed to deliver our quality programs that fill a need in the community.

**Product Excellence:** Everything comes down to the delivery of our excellent product.

Our classes, camps and performances tie directly to our mission, and this is where MoCo Arts excels. We meet every student where they are in their journey, beginner to advanced, and we strive to make the arts accessible to all by providing discounts and tuition assistance to classes and camps, and complimentary tickets to live performances to families in need.

While most students will not pursue dance or theatre as a profession, MoCo provides them with skills for life, such as self-confidence, discipline, teamwork, dedication and creativity. These skills prove vital to their success in school, the community, business and life.

MoCo transforms and enriches the lives of our students, as well as the collective life of the community. We constantly look for new

ways to fulfill our mission, growing our programming and community outreach as warranted. This requires vigilance, a realistic view of affordability and, most of all, a continuing love and respect for what we do and those we serve.

Collectively, this is what has led to MoCo Arts success these last 2½ years. We let our mission drive a talented and dedicated team partnered with our community, while we hold ourselves accountable to be fiscally responsible in the delivery of an incredible product.

We believe in continuing to grow the “MoCo Magic,” and are committed to being a vibrant part of the fabric of the Monadnock Region for years to come. ■

*A successful nonprofit must foster teamwork and manage an open relationship between board and staff in order to achieve its goals.*

gaged finance committee comprised of experienced experts. These individuals are important resources to management decisions, and to board and staff education. Unfortunately, many nonprofits have come to accept debt and budgets overruns as routine, thus allowing this to become part of their daily operations and culture. While not every decision needs everyone’s input, each senior staff member in a nonprofit needs to understand and participate in fiscal decisions and take appropriate ownership of solutions to financial challenges.

One of the key responsibilities of a nonprofit board is to ensure that the organization has enough resources to fulfill its mission. At MoCo, board and staff members are



# Writer Bios

**Name:**

Karen J. Lyle

**Job:**

Creator and owner, Creative Encounters

**Educational Background:**

Bachelor of Science, University of Rhode Island

**Town in which you live:**

Keene

**How do you relax?**

RELAX?

**Favorite book on business?**

“Marketing Lessons from the Grateful Dead” by David Meerman Scott and Brian Halligan

**Best advice you’ve received?**

It will be alright in the end; if it is not alright, it is not the end.

**Mentor(s)?**

My husband, Rob Lyle, and my brother, John Reichert

**Who do you pay attention to locally?**

Listen, share, learn from anyone I respect (insight can come from a variety of odd and wonderful people)

**How do you save time?**

Prioritize, focus – as the saying goes: If your plate is full, eat faster!



**Name:** Reagan Messer

**Job:** Executive Director/Artistic Director of Dance, MoCo Arts

**Educational Background:**

Cross Keys High School, Atlanta, Ga.; Rotaru Ballet School

**Town in which you live:** Keene

**How do you relax?**

Spending my free time with my wife and two daughters.

**Favorite book on business?**

I don't really have a favorite.

**Best advice you’ve received?**

You're not always going to have all the answers. Surround yourself with smart people who do not have to be micro-managed.

**Mentor(s)?**

Bruce Marks, former Artistic Director of Boston Ballet; D. David Brown, former General Manager of Boston Ballet; People I respect willing to share their wealth of knowledge

**Who do you pay attention to locally?**

Everyone. You can learn something from everyone.

**How do you save time?**

As a former dancer, and Artistic Director, I would just speed up the music.



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