MOVING UP FROM EXCELLENT
Mural Arts had a strong and distinguished reputation for programmatic excellence. Could HCM practices help to further up the ante?

An interview with Jane Golden
Founder and Executive Director, City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program

The City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (Mural Arts) began with an intriguing seed of an idea: engage a young artist to help combat the city’s graffiti crisis by turning destructive energies into creative ones. That artist, Jane Golden, reached out to graffiti writers and provided opportunities to channel their ideas and talents into mural making. Their murals transformed long-neglected city neighborhoods, as Mural Arts, reorganized in 1996 under the city’s Department of Recreation, became the nation’s largest public art program and a model for community development and restorative justice across the country and around the globe. To support the organization’s growth, Jane established the Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates, a nonprofit organized to raise funds and provide support to the program; Mural Arts now has a budget of nearly $9 million and a payroll that includes 52 employees and 200 artists.

As the Mural Arts budget literally quadrupled, Jane became well aware of the challenges before her. “As we grew I saw that we were too lean at the top,” she says. “We were beginning to run into trouble running our programs, without the appropriate systems and talent in place. But I’m very transactional; I just want to get things done. I knew we needed help, but building infrastructure felt like it would be time-consuming. It also seemed like a waste of money we could be applying to our work.”

Enter The Kresge Foundation, a longtime supporter of Mural Arts, with a unique invitation: to apply for a grant to address specific leadership and human capital management needs and create a strategic plan for the future (see left). Mural Arts was chosen for the pilot and began its six-month engagement with AchieveMission, in February 2015.

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We sat down with Jane to check in on Mural Art’s progress and to learn from their experience.

**AM: Why was the Kresge invitation so compelling for you?**

**JG:** When we were invited to apply, it occurred to me that this would be an ideal opportunity for me to engage deeply, myself, in the human capital challenges. Day to day, our chief operating officer is the one who thinks more about these questions. But at this point we are trying to address a deficit that potentially affects our long-term sustainability. I thought that being a part of an AchieveMission Talent Initiative engagement would provide the right structure for me to become more involved.

**AM: What did you expect to work on?**

**JG:** I am especially concerned about developing and managing our team. How do you make senior leadership and the management team more efficient? What is the sweet spot between overindulging people and burning them out? How should we prioritize new hires, run good searches and find the best possible candidates?

Like every executive director, I also think about my successor and making sure that there is good continuity so that Mural Arts thrives. So the bottom line for me was: five years from now, what will Mural Arts look like? If I were to leave, would the organization flounder? How does that not happen? What’s the long term plan, and how can we be more effective in the shorter term?

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**AM: Who from Mural Arts is involved?**

**JG:** Our team was primarily me, our chief operating officer, chief financial officer, and director of development, particularly for the Discovery phase [where AchieveMission assesses the organization’s current practices and reports back]. Later, the broader senior management team added insight into some of the causes of the findings. These insights have been important in shaping how we design solutions—for example, defining selection criteria for new hires.

**AM: What are the important insights you’ve taken away from the work?**

**JG:** The feedback was not easy to hear. I thought I was clear but I learned that I’m not always that clear. There was feedback that I execute inconsistently, that I sometimes skip the org chart … I didn’t want to hear that I am inconsistent in how I support people. The Discovery work put me on notice, made me think about recognizing staff and holding them accountable. And about making sure that we reflect on what we are doing, and course-correct when necessary.

This all led to conversations about the importance of having the right people in our jobs, and how we recruit to make certain that we do. I learned that I must be focused on building a pipeline of artists and administrators—not just when we have a role to fill, but continuously.

**AM: Any revelations?**
JG: I’ve worked with many of the same people since 1998. I had to think about being more inclusive, how to treat people equitably. I need to lift people up, especially our high performers.

Initially I wondered if the steps we were taking, like reconsidering our organization structure and ensuring more representation in our hiring decisions, would make a noticeable difference. But I started to change my mind when I saw the staff respond really well to what would make things function better. That was really an epiphany for me.

AM: What is AchieveMission’s part in this work?
JG: The AchieveMission team really pushes us to be honest. A great example: they asked for a check-in, just me and our COO. We are two people in charge of a lot. How do we maintain an open relationship, enforce standards and have real consistency? We had a really powerful discussion. Leaders have to understand what they do best and surround themselves with others who do what they don’t do well.

AM: We’ve mostly talked thus far about the engagement from the point of view of you as member of a working team. How are you feeling as the leader of Mural Arts?
JG: I want us to do really good work ... take on tough social issues and move the needle. I’m tenacious; I thought I could do it alone or with a small team. My ambitions far exceed my ability to pull it off. I managed by will until it was no longer feasible. I want excellence.

I’m not a good planner, and I don’t want us to revert. We’re trying to create systems that allow us to continue this work, continue the change that has begun.

AM: Jane, do you have any advice for other nonprofit CEOs who are thinking about leadership and talent?
JG: As the head of an organization you are continually making a case, going out of your way to paint a good picture. Facing the challenges that the external world doesn’t necessarily see can be dark and scary. I would say, be honest and face the issues collectively. In that way it doesn’t all seem so foreboding.