

*Interview with Shaun Tai – Oakland Digital Arts and Literacy Center*

Shaun Tai, Founder and Director of Oakland Digital Arts and Literacy Center has a vision towards educating, inspiring, and empowering low-income communities so that they can be better-informed and self-reliant through harnessing digital media and technology for economic success and professional vitality. Shaun's conception and development towards ODALC started years ago, with the organization officially launching publicly with 501c3 status a little over a year ago. Although the Center and programs are slightly over a year old, Shaun is not new to the world of nonprofit management or the acute focus of harnessing work and time to help others. I specifically choose Shaun as my subject, not only because he is an inspiring individual with a superb mission, but because he is currently in the crux of shaping his organization's work with paramount values and goals that are at the heart of their primary focus to help improve lives and community. When thinking about Shaun and his vision for the organization and the goals I reflected on readings from Frederickson, "Administrators are not neutral. They should be committed to both good management and social equity as values, things to be achieved, or rationales" (as cited in Shafritz/Hyde, 2008, p. 297). There are regular daily challenges where he needs to make the best decisions based on limited resources, time and budgeting. Also, as the leader of a new organization, he faces specific challenges to support the organization's goals and sustainability. Through current and past challenges he has learned that employing certain skills will secure his nonprofit management and Center's success for the future.

Today, Shaun's primary challenges shaping his work regularly revolve around building a dedicated and committed team that share the same vision and focus as the organization's mission and goals for the community, shaping his programs best to the realistic needs of individuals in the community and realizing the best way to develop a sustainable model for the Center that dovetails with the program's services. Regarding building staff, Shaun wants to consistently be sure he's making the right decisions because of his and his current staff's limited time. He is finding that a core challenge of staff development encompasses balancing the time and effort to train someone to take on a role versus doing some things on his own or a dedicated staffer's.

Some current and prospective staffers are and will be volunteers, so it's difficult to grasp equilibrium between taking time to train folks when they may or may not be long-term. He's looking for the right balance of individuals that offer a strong skill set as well as dedication and longevity based on the role. The current programs and services offered have been largely chiseled out through guidance from learning about what is needed in the community. This current challenge reflects on the importance of what Shaun mentioned as, 'perception versus reality', meaning you may have a set of services you think will be helpful for the community, but you cannot really be certain about what is best to offer until you work one on one with the public and learn from them their true needs. One example of this would be their service of offering digital literacy training to small business owners in the community as local business owners continually ask for the Center's help towards bolstering their business in the tough economy. This idea connotes Kaufman as he contemplates public representation in this passage, "One type of proposal for making administrative agencies more representative is traditional in character; situating spokesmen for the interests affected in strategic positions within the organizations" (as cited in Shari/Hyde, 2008, p. 268). Last, Shaun is interested in building a sustainable model that will keep the organization from being solely reliant on funds from grants and foundations that aren't always reliable. This challenge partially reflects back on the importance of being sensitive and listening to the needs of the clients they serve, as the Center should do their best to find reasonable service costs based on those in need and then find the best balance of how much they should be subsidized by outside funding.

From the first day the Center was conceived and opened to today, Shaun feels that the current core values shaping their organization will remain static as well as support their goals. He was quick to list these terms, which I will review further: commitment, authenticity, longevity and sacrifice. He mentioned experiencing these daily in his work. Commitment and being committed to people that can use help is key and at the center of their work. Next, he discussed authenticity, which he described as the importance of proving that they care and are able to help and hope to gain the community and public's trust. When mentioning longevity, this means that they are interested in building long term relationships with their constituents once they've gained their trust. So, if someone comes to the center to learn how to set up email, they hope they'll come back again to learn how to use it well to communicate and perhaps another time to learn further email techniques and beyond. These values touch on concepts discussed by Barzelay and Armajani's, "A customer-driven agency engages in two-way communication with its customers in order to assess and revise its operational strategy" (as cited in Shayfritz/Hyde, 2008, p. 532). Finally, we talked about sacrifice and the fact that all the mentioned items are connected but will take plenty of time, effort, learning, revising and repeat efforts to best serve the public.

Shaun listed a number of skills he feels are truly important for the future of nonprofit management and his leadership at the Center. At the top of his list are learning, influence, communication and the ability to strategize. When he reviewed learning this took two perspectives, one was the ability to learn from clients and constituents by being empathetic to their points of view and the other was learning from internal organizational mistakes and finding ways to make the next efforts work. From the former, this passage can be applied, “The potential exists for citizens to participate actively with public officials in customizing the services that they and their communities receive” (Rosenblum, Kravchuk, Clerkin, 2009, p. 37). In both cases, they revolve around building more effective programs and systems within to best serve the public. Also important is learning how to be influential, especially with potential supporters, funders and advisors. If you cannot pitch your mission and have others be interested in your goals, this will not help the organization’s impact. Communication supports each of these skills that are necessary and Shaun feels that being able to cross communicate effectively with all levels within and connected to the organization is a special skill that is needed for future efforts. Finally, he believes that strategizing efforts within and for the organization is an important skill to be developed and employed, as well as can be shaped by performing well all the former mentioned skills discussed.

A common theme resonating throughout Shaun’s discussion and hopes for ODALC points to how to best serve the public with the current assets and skills within the organization and its mission and goals. Throughout his interview, I felt that we revisited the concept of being sensitive, conscious and responsive to the feedback and needs of those in the community they are serving. So, by learning from those in their community they holistically shape programs and systems by converting valuable information into initiatives that make an impact. I believe that this sensitivity to the public and the ability to help those based on creating services from learned information is an important current trend in nonprofit management that can help make well advised and thought driven decisions to initiate change and progress.

*References:*

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