

Our Boards in Action: Ann S. Bowers

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

From Apple and Intel to San Francisco's Exploratorium and San Jose's Tech Museum of Innovation, Ann S. Bowers has witnessed the importance of leadership in all facets of Silicon Valley. She pioneered human resources management in high-growth startups before turning her attention to education and museums. Along with serving on the Tech Museum's board (after 20 years on the Exploratorium's), Bowers is chair of the board of the Noyce Foundation and spearheaded the creation of the seminal Noyce Leadership Institute (*noyceleadership.org*), which is concluding this year. She spoke with *Dimensions* about the institute's impact and what comes next.

Ann, tell me exactly what your role has been with the Noyce Leadership Institute.

Well basically, I created it. I was on the board of both the Exploratorium and the Tech Museum, they were both looking for new leaders, and I was on the search committee for both and realized that the talent pool was really thin. So I talked to our board about that, that science centers are a very important part of the informal ecostructure and important for kids to find out that science is interesting just by being able to go some place like that. And we decided that we would try to develop a leadership network, just kind of a pipeline of leadership, so that was the first step. The second step was really probably much more critical and more difficult and that was to find someone to lead it, so we thought about universities and decided that that was not a good idea because they tend to be not terribly creative, and so we were looking and looking for an individual to be the leader and fortunately found Geno Schnell, who has been leading the program ever since, from the very beginning.

Why is the NLI concluding this year?

Because the foundation is concluding this year.

It was just a natural time for things to come to an end.

It was. The foundation has been operating for 25 years and I've been the head of it for 25 years, and we always knew that we would not turn it over to someone not in the family, and my stepdaughter, oldest stepdaughter, who

was the successor has gone off on a different career and she's just not available, so 25 years just sounds like a good time.

Yeah. It's a nice number.

I should add however that although we're not having another cohort, we are focusing on alumni groups.

OK, great. For now, in terms of just the cohorts, how do you view the institute's impact and legacy?

Well the impact has been huge. We have Noyce Fellows, and they've had a huge, huge impact on their institutions. And we started, I don't know if you realize this, but we started asking the Sponsors who are the ones who nominate the Fellows to join the program as well about five years ago, that was Geno's idea, and that turned out to be absolutely brilliant, so we're having sort of a twofer here. So we work on the Sponsors who are usually the heads of the museums, and so we've had Sponsors and leaders from every major institution in the country.

Wow. Are there any anecdotes in terms of how you've seen the institute experience benefit or change a museum leader?

That's a very interesting question. I have to tread softly with that. I have seen a number of people get bolder, and I'm going to pick Lindy Hoyer from the Children's Museum in Omaha, because one of the things that Lindy walked away with from Noyce Leadership program was the need to partner with other organizations in her community in order to do any of the things she wanted to do, she just couldn't do it by herself, which is what she was trying to do. So she started reaching out to businesses and the Y, just everybody, and so now she really has a community of support that are engaged with helping with exhibits and helping with finances. It's just a more vibrant and frankly happier situation.

That's wonderful. How do you think your experience with the institute has affected your role in leadership and as a board member?

My background is in human resources, and so that's what I've lent to the leadership programming. We've spent a lot of time in the last couple of years talking about working on the kind of culture you need to have within an organization to make it a productive and vibrant and joyful place to work. So I think that as a result of trying to move my skill set into a different field, one that I didn't play in because I was in business, I've learned a lot about the

difficulties of working with an organization who can't measure its effectiveness in terms of sales. It's just a much more complicated process, and that's been both interesting and revealing, and I've really learned a lot from that.

Yeah, very different from Intel and Apple, I'm sure.

Absolutely.

And you are still on the board of the Tech Museum of Innovation.

I am on the board; I was the chair until a year and a half before, so I see it from the inside out. And I was on the board of the Exploratorium for 20 years.

Right. What are your hopes for both of those museums really?

Well one of the things that's interesting, we actually had a conversation, a small group of us got together about a week ago, and what they're still working on and what they need to continue to work on is engagement of the community. Not just in getting them to be visitors and members but to really participate in some deeper, much more meaningful way. And it's not the way they've been used to working and it's difficult for them to make that jump, but when they've first stuck their toe in the water it's for the most part been quite rewarding. So that and museums I have to say are not very good about thinking about the culture of the organization. So, they're working on that as well.

That's great. Is there anything I haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

I think that what I'm trying to do now with the really ambitious alumni is to get them to sort of be evangelists, to spread what they've learned not only in their own institutions but in the professional groups they work in, like ASTC. And so we're having conversations about how they can do that, and I think that's really important. If you just learn something and hug it to yourself it's not as valuable as sharing it.

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