

# In Focus: Executive Leadership

FASHION

## Peter Arnold: Leading Fashion to Its Future Talent

● The executive director of the YMA Fashion Scholarship Fund shares how his multifaceted experiences have shaped his leadership style.

BY WWD STAFF

**Peter Arnold's path** to the executive director role at the YMA Fashion Scholarship Fund is rich with many diverse experiences. The executive skills learned in each role prepared Arnold to tackle greater challenges. As part of an ongoing series of executive interviews, Tim Boerkoel, founder of global executive search and consulting firm The Brownstone Group, talks with Arnold about leadership, his role at the YMA Fashion Scholarship Fund and how curiosity and empathy converge to "get things done."

**Tim Boerkoel: Peter, you've led teams in a variety of environments, ranging from designer brands to philanthropic organizations. Last November, you were named executive director of the YMA Fashion Scholarship Fund. What drew you to this opportunity?**

**Peter Arnold:** I've had a nonlinear career path, starting with my time as a lawyer, and then my tenure at the CFDA, followed by years in the industry as the president or chief executive officer of a number of apparel brands. As disparate as those experiences might have been, they do seem to make me uniquely suited for the role of executive director of the Fashion Scholarship Fund. (The search firm that contacted me called me a "unicorn" candidate). The organization has a pure and clear mission that is closely aligned with my personal mission, which is to help young talent succeed. It was a serendipitous opportunity.

The Fashion Scholarship Fund has long-standing relationships with over 60 colleges and universities. We give well over \$1 million to approximately 200 students annually. In addition, each of the student scholarship recipients gets a mentor, each is placed in an internship, and equally important, after graduation, we continue to provide professional development and support through a very robust alumni network.

The CFDA, the NRF Foundation and a few other organizations in our industry give scholarships to a select number of students from a select number of schools. But there is no other organization in the U.S. with the breadth and depth of service to young fashion talent as the FSF. We are the foremost fashion-oriented education and workforce development nonprofit in the U.S.

With such an estimable cause and such a straightforward mission, I am fortunate to leverage the professional experiences that I've had to date and apply them to a role that allows me to amplify the good work the FSF has done for the past 82 years. But, now it is time to contemporize it, make more noise about it, lead the conversation about what it means to identify and foster and nurture young talent, and connect the dots for that talent – by showing students, so often from small public and private colleges and universities, the way forward in our industry.



Peter Arnold with FSF alums Ethan Stepp and Ming Cong.

There are many talented students out there, and they are pursuing not just design, but merchandising, marketing and analytics, supply chain, and other disciplines. It's a talent pool that is going to enrich our industry and move it forward. To add some perspective, the FSF was started in 1937 by a group of men's wear businessmen from Seventh Avenue. And it has evolved, and the industry has evolved. Today, there's an opportunity to become much more – to include among its constituent employers and supporters – the breadth of what our industry now represents: categories such as beauty and home, and more innovative, digitally native businesses.

**T.B.: And did any particular previous experience prepare you to tackle the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities that exist at YMA FSF?**

**P.A.:** I started my career as a corporate lawyer, and so my perspective has always been a transactional one. At the outset of any opportunity with a client, or working group of parties, often with competing interests, the challenge is to identify their respective aims and aspirations and tailor a strategy (in this context, a deal) to deliver (through lots of negotiations and documentation) the expected result. That learning was applicable to the CFDA. Albeit a different context, it involved soliciting opinions, identifying and being respectful of sensitivities, and crafting and moving an initiative forward in such a way that the designers and other stakeholders felt that the "deal" delivered on what they had contemplated.

The process was similar with the creative founder owners I've worked with over the years. Partnering with an incredibly dynamic creative may mean taking 10 ideas and distilling them down to four executable ones, then delivering a reasonable business result. My training as a corporate transactional partner at Sidley Austin served me well. As with clients and other folks around the table, such as bankers and accountants, it was important to listen, be empathetic,

and understand the various aims of the stakeholders – all of which enables one to move the transaction forward. It really boils down to having the ability to listen while also having a "creative feel" that you are relating to what he or she is imagining. And then to have the business and process acumen that allows for execution and delivery of a desired result.

For example, Cynthia Rowley was an "idea factory," and I mean that as a great compliment. She'd arrive in the morning with 20 amazing ideas written in Sharpie on her hand and arm. My challenge was to edit those 20 into 10 possibly executable ones and then, perhaps three real on-brand ideas. That's still a potent alchemy – a successful creator founder needs to have a good "marriage" with his or her business partner.

**T.B.: When it comes to leading a small organization with great reach, can you share your approach to motivating diverse entities – from students to executives, brands to colleges – to drive tangible outcomes?**

**P.A.:** The FSF is indeed a small organization with great reach. I seem to have always worked with organizations and brands, which had halos bigger than their actual businesses. I love that challenge. I love the breadth and diversity of constituencies. Now I'm dealing with 60 colleges and universities, the educators on those campuses with whom we've had long-standing relationships with, and, in turn, their and our constituents – the students they've identified are most likely to be the "best and brightest." We are seeking to add more schools and students to that mix. We are engaging employer partners that speak to the wide range of our students' aspirations. That's why a partnership with The Lead, for example (which is associated with the 100 most innovative new businesses, and is working with us to procure internships for our scholars) is so exciting.

As I mentioned, it is an exciting time

in the world of talent identification and acquisition. I've had many on-campus conversations with students, educators and administrators, as well as with employers. We are having critical discussions about diversity and inclusion, and how to ensure that our workforce accurately reflects the population. There are students of color, students who are first-generation, students at risk – these are the constituents I want to include in these conversations.

This means we need to provide opportunities, support, nurture and foster at a very early moment in a student's career so that companies such as Kering and LVMH, and Tapestry and Capri can rightfully consider, not just the amazing graduates of private design schools, but students we work with at HBCU's and public colleges and universities. We are uniquely suited to framing these discussions and delivering on programs that effectuate these aims – that's what will make FSF in the vanguard on these topics.

**T.B.: Does a leader lead differently at a brand compared to at a philanthropic or another type of organization?**

**P.A.:** Being a really effective leader requires a creative empathy and a versatility and nimbleness – whatever the leadership context demands. My years as a partner in a law firm, the executive director of the CFDA, the ceo/president of a number of fashion brands, and now the executive director of the FSF – have given me a bit of fashion world view, and a context, that provides for the dynamism that I hope I bring to the role. I have different constituents now, but I still look at everyone as a client – much like I did years ago when I was a corporate lawyer. When I talk about empathy, versatility or nimbleness, I mean, how can I listen effectively, really hear a young student talking about his or her dreams, meaningfully advise a graduate on her nascent business idea, leverage the relationship and reach of a board member, meet with a prospective corporate partner and forge a mutually beneficial programmatic initiative, all in the pursuit of advancing the FSF's mission.

**T.B.: You are intimately connected to the realities of tomorrow's leaders, understanding their educational backgrounds and the generation's approach to life and work. How do you get smart on this, and how are you helping the industry understand the talent of the future?**

**P.A.:** Our organization is uniquely situated – we have a powerful array of corporate supporters and board members who come from all industries, sectors and channels of distribution. I spend a great deal of my time on campuses meeting with students and educators and administrators – hearing what they're teaching and studying and also what they imagine the world holds for them. Marrying that learning and those expectations to the reality of an industry that is changing so rapidly mandates a breadth of understanding that I think serves our mission quite well. I'm insatiably curious about this industry and where it's headed and what it means to be an innovator – what has worked and doesn't seem to work for brands, for retailers, for wholesalers. It's an incredibly exciting, albeit challenging time. That creates the dynamism I'm talking about.