

# How Can Orchestras Become More Diverse?

Distinguished African-American orchestra professionals discuss their lives in orchestras today.

by Jesse Rosen

Last August I spent two days at the Gateways Music Festival in Rochester, New York. Never heard of it? Neither had I. But it's a remarkable festival that all of us in orchestras should get to know. The biennial festival celebrates the participation and contributions of classically trained musicians of African descent through more than 50 solo, chamber, and orchestra performances in the Eastman Theatre at Eastman School of Music, houses of worship, schools, and other community locations throughout the city and suburbs of Rochester. More than 100 musicians from around the United States participate in Gateways and perform for a diverse and multi-ethnic audience of nearly 10,000.

Being there was like being welcomed into a family reunion, but not exactly my family. It was very familiar in the sense that here were wonderfully talented musicians, generously sharing their gifts in programs new and old, big and small. But as I came to understand, the experience of each of these musicians in their home orchestras is unique. In almost every instance, each is the only African-American musician in his or her orchestra. So you can imagine the joy and excitement of coming together for six days.

As our country continues its difficult conversation about race, and as orchestras

confront the homogeneity of their workforce, I wanted to hear the stories of these musicians, to understand more about their pathways into orchestras, their day-to-day experiences, and their visions for the future. I am happy to share a transcript of our roundtable discussion.

**JESSE ROSEN:** The most striking thing to me about the Gateways Festival was the spirit among the players, the energy with all of you. I'm interested to hear what you get out of it—what it means for you not so much as a larger cause but as

**“A lot of African-American kids play instruments, but they drop off because they're not seeing people who look like them and not getting the idea that this is something they can do for a living.” —Judy Dines**

individual musicians coming together.

**JUDY DINES:** This is maybe my third or fourth time at Gateways. I love going, and I give it priority over any of my other summer things like the National Flute Association Convention or other festivals, because I really enjoy playing with so many other great African-American musicians. That to me is great—to have all of us on the stage, and it's a good representa-



Jesse Rosen, President and CEO, League of American Orchestras

tion for us. A lot of times in the media, people are—I don't know how quite to say this in the best way—people don't seem to think good things, and this festival is really a good thing. To have so many people out there playing is really fantastic. Every time, it gets better and better, so that's why I enjoy going to this festival.

**JESSE ROSEN:** When you say people don't often think good things, could you say more about what you mean?

**JUDY DINES:** I look at the nightly news or newspaper articles where people who maybe don't know a lot of African-American people in general may think the way we are portrayed is the only way we all are. What I like about this festival is it's a completely different thing, because we're not represented in large numbers in orchestras. People don't think a lot about African Americans playing classical music, and this festival puts that out there.

**TITUS UNDERWOOD:** This summer was my first time at Gateways. I mainly enjoyed it because I've never had that experience—ever—in my life. Period. I'm usually the different person within whatever space that I'm in, and usually

I get an array of questions regarding my presence. The thing that warmed my heart the most when I went to Gateways was that there were none of those questions. It was very nice to go there and be normal, making music with other people, and not being a spectacle in any way. It made me feel a lot more relaxed, more at home, like I was playing with family members or cousins that I hadn't seen before, and I finally get to make music with them. Any concerns that I did have about the arts or talking about African Americans

**“There needs to be more representation in the professional field showing African-American musicians performing at a high level—just as there need to be more female conductors or more female CEOs.”**

**—Titus Underwood**

in the arts, I could speak my mind and people were like, “I’ve had that experience myself.” It was a heartwarming, almost healing process. I’ve been playing oboe for almost twenty years and I had never had that experience.



Flutist **Judy Dines**, a member of the Houston Symphony, is also a very active performer in Houston and beyond. Locally, she performs in the Greenbriar Consortium, the Foundation for Modern Music, and the St. Cecilia Chamber Society. Outside of Houston, Dines is a member of the Ritz Chamber Players. She has also participated in the Grand Teton Music Festival Orchestra and has performed at several National Flute Association Conventions. In the orchestral world, Dines has performed selected weeks with

the National Symphony Orchestra, the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, and the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra. Born in Washington, D.C., Dines attended Temple University in Philadelphia and the Peabody Institute in Baltimore before going to Houston. She joined the Houston Symphony in 1992.

**HERB SMITH:** I’ve been going to Gateways for a while, so I can hark back to the first time I was there with [Gateways Founder] Armenta Hummings. At that time, we were wearing African garb, dashikis and stuff, and that’s even more of a cultural explosion because to see and hear Beethoven played by African-American



Fred Tanisley

A standing ovation greets a 2015 Gateways Music Festival concert in Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre, led by Michael Morgan.

ican players wearing African garb—that’s completely different than what you would see on any concert stage. I understand why we wear more formal clothes now, but I also understand where Armenta was coming from as far as this being something completely different.

I live in Rochester, New York and play with the Rochester Philharmonic, and one of the main things I get from Gateways is that we perform at the Eastman Theatre—my home court. I know that stage, so to see all African-American classical musicians on that stage is kind of, “Wow.”

It’s different than what I’m used to. For me, the concerts are about love. There’s not the attitude, the jadedness in the orchestra. Like Titus said, it’s like playing with family. I love that.

The other thing I was thinking about was the painter Kehinde Wiley. He puts African-American people in what looks

like an old painting of an aristocrat from England, so it’s an African-American person in the same pose. It totally blows your mind. To me, Gateways is a Wiley picture—having all African-American players in a concert hall playing classical music.

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** I go to Gateways because it really is a family reunion—with instruments. There is not that feeling anywhere else I go. To be in front of an orchestra where everyone clearly wants to be, and wants it to be good, and wants to support everybody else on the stage, is really moving. I was at the first Gateways Music Festival, but there’s no [ongoing] conductor for the festival, so when I am invited to Gateways, I conduct because they want me. You get this feeling that everybody wants to be there, everybody wants the music to be the best it possibly can be. You can’t bottle that. That is so incredibly rare. We throw everything we’ve got into that week. I can’t imagine anything better to do.

**LEE KOONCE:** Everything that everyone has said so far is certainly my experience, too. I’m not playing an instrument at Gateways, but helping coordinate and organize. As a musician myself, I attended Eastman, and like all of you probably grew up being the only one of African descent in my community who studied classical music. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. There was nobody carrying around sheet music for



Scenes from the 2013 Gateways Music Festival. Above: a chamber music concert at Hochstein School of Music and Dance, with Kelly Hall-Tompkins at center. Top right and below: Michael Morgan conducts Gateways Music Festival Orchestra concerts in Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre.

Beethoven sonatas and Bach preludes who looked like me. Michael [Morgan] and I were at Oberlin at the same time. There were very few of us at Oberlin. When I went to Eastman, there were even fewer of us. Coming to Gateways, it's as if the world makes sense. It's like, "Oh my gosh, this really feels good, this feels right." It's not to exclude others, it's to build up this community. That's what's so important about this experience for me. It's building this community that is desperately yearning for this kind of experience.

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** One of the hardest things when dealing with younger people and trying to keep African-American kids in the classical music business is them feeling enough support to think they can keep going. They feel like they're out there by themselves, and it's a discouraging business, even for all of us that have careers. For a young person who doesn't have enough backing to stay in that, they drop off and do something else that feels like they have more support. Even just visually at Gateways, you see that there is support for you, that what you do is, in fact, normal.

**JESSE ROSEN:** What do you bring back when you return to your regular environment, where for the most part you are one of maybe two or three African Americans in your orchestras? How does the experience at Gateways affect how you look at your home orchestra, your home context?

**TITUS UNDERWOOD:** I'm recharged, and that allows me to do two things. One, the recharged battery musically—a love for music and playing with people who support you. Two, an acceptance of myself. You play at Gateways and see an entire orchestra where everyone looks like you. It helps an acceptance of myself, and when I go into my regular orchestra I'm more relaxed, more me.

**HERB SMITH:** I feel more recharged, reaffirmed, supported. I'm not saying that I don't have other support systems, because all of us have other support systems, whether it's our teachers or colleagues or

**Lee Koonce** is a New York-based arts administrator, consultant, and pianist, and chairs the Gateways Music Festival Artistic Programs Committee. He previously held leadership roles as executive director of Ballet Hispanico and Third Street Music School Settlement in New York City; executive director of Sherwood Conservatory of Music in Chicago; and director of community relations for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Koonce received a Bachelors of Music degree in Piano Performance from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, a Bachelors of Arts in Spanish Literature from Oberlin College, and a Master's of Music in Piano Performance and Literature from the Eastman School of Music.



whatever. However, it is nice to see other people who look like you doing what you do. It's priceless, like the feeling when you see your family. It's not exclusionary, it's not that other people can't come. It's a community that's been built, a community that needed it because a lot of times, I felt like an island, out there by myself. A lot of times the surroundings make people

"If an orchestra has a season and there's not one person of color as a guest soloist, I'm thinking, 'What in the world is going on here?'" That's something that orchestras can change right now. There are so many talented classical musicians of African descent."  
—Lee Koonce

feel ostracized, but I didn't feel ostracized there in any way. I showed up, we were talking about these natural things that we have in common. It gives you more life and more meaning to what you're doing, more purpose.

**JESSE ROSEN:** From your own experiences and professional development, what do you regard as the most significant thing that really helped move you forward and kept you on a track to advance into the important professional positions that you now hold?

**JUDY DINES:** I grew up in Washington, D.C., and learned how to play the flute in the D.C. Youth Orchestra Program. It was a neat program for lots of kids in D.C., and there were black and white people in it. My father wanted

my siblings and me to play instruments, because he was a great lover of classical music. He was a lifelong subscriber to the National Symphony Orchestra, so that's where I got my basis for classical music. In high school I was in the National Symphony's Youth Fellowship Program, which gave us free lessons and we went to rehearsals and things. That's when I



**Michael Morgan** was born in Washington, D.C., where he began conducting at the age of twelve. While at Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, he also studied with Gunther Schuller and Seiji Ozawa at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, where he worked with Leonard Bernstein. His operatic debut was in 1982 at the Vienna State Opera. In 1986, Sir Georg Solti chose him as assistant conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a position he held for seven years under Solti and Daniel Barenboim. In 1986, he was invited by Bernstein to debut with the New York Philharmonic. He has appeared with most of America's major orchestras, as well as with opera companies. In addition to serving as music director of California's Oakland Symphony, Morgan is artistic director of the Oakland Symphony Youth Orchestra and music director at Bear Valley Music Festival. He is music director emeritus of the Sacramento Philharmonic and Opera.

decided I should continue the flute. That was my basis: the program, my parents.

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** I can piggy-back on that because I got a lot of time in front of the musicians in the D.C. Youth

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—Michael Morgan

Orchestra, conducted my first rehearsals for things like Mahler symphonies and works that normally youth orchestras didn't play at the time—but we did. At that point, James DePreist was the associate conductor at the National Symphony, and I got a letter from him that got me into National Symphony rehearsals. I missed about half of high school going to the National Symphony rehearsals—I still don't believe I actually graduated. All along the way, I had people who reached back, whether it was Julius Rudel or James DePreist or a push from Bernstein, all these people who kept me going at critical moments. All it takes is one person who gives you a little push, but some people don't even have that one person.

**HERB SMITH:** I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. Within the Cincinnati Public School District I went to the School for Creative and Performing Arts, which had an orchestra program, band, jazz band, and so forth. Then I was in the Cincinnati

Youth Symphony, which was affiliated with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. We would do our joint concerts and I would sit next to Phil Collins and Marie Speziale, trumpet players in the Cincinnati Symphony. Sitting next to them, you're just thinking, “Oh my goodness, I want to do this, I want to be in an orchestra.” You always have teachers or people who help guide you. I remember a teacher who came to my school during my senior year. He was a graduate of Eastman, but Eastman wasn't even on my radar, and he was like, “You need to audition for Eastman.” I was like, “What is Eastman?” I had no clue. But I got in and it worked out. My teacher at Eastman, Barbara Butler, would check up on

me. You have to have someone to guide you or help you. Having the opportunity to be in the youth symphony, to feel what it's like to be in the real deal and have that exposure, you think, “Okay, now I have something to shoot for.”

**TITUS UNDERWOOD:** I grew up in Pensacola, Florida, started oboe when I was in sixth grade. I grew up in a very musical family. I'm a pastor's kid, the youngest of six kids, and we all played instruments. My sister plays violin; we're the only two who majored in music and went to school for it. She introduced me to the oboe. My parents supported it, we used to go to the local symphony, I saw my sister doing classical music, all of us were so musically oriented, and my parents made sure we were exposed to different types of music. I began to take music more seriously when I started being home-schooled in eighth grade, and joined a home-school association that had a band. The band was led by this lady named Glenda Jones who recognized my talent and pushed me hard to look at conservatories—I didn't know that I could audition for an orchestra or a conservatory. I didn't know anything about orchestras or the work, I was completely clueless. She said “You should study at Cleveland Institute of Music with John Mack. He's really, really, really good.” Because I had a competitive spirit, I

Chamber music is an essential part of the Gateways Music Festival program. In photo, from left: Roy Beason, oboe; Judy Dines, flute; Antoine Clark, clarinet; and Maya Stone, bassoon, at the 2015 Festival.



Jerome Brooks

wanted to go to the good school. It wasn't until my sophomore year in college that I took it super seriously. John Mack was a big influence. It was mainly the support of parents and pivotal people that helped keep my interest in classical music.

At the time, I wasn't interested in it because I felt that it was stuffy. I was the only black kid around. I didn't necessarily enjoy the culture of it, but I enjoyed the music itself. It was hard for me to separate the two. The culture of classical music felt foreign to me, but I knew that I loved playing oboe and that was something that I couldn't live without.

**JESSE ROSEN:** How would you define the culture of classical music?

**TITUS UNDERWOOD:** To be frank, I thought it was very white, which was foreign to me. I grew up in a very black suburb in Pensacola, and in the South, the blacks are over here, the white people are over there. I didn't have many white friends growing up, and when I got into undergrad, that was the first time I was the only black kid around. I was the only black undergrad when I first got to CIM. It was a very weird experience and I felt out of place. I mean, at the time, I had dreadlocks, I'm dressed in Rocawear, playing oboe. I didn't make sense to people, so they were like, "Who is this guy? Is he a percussionist? Is he a bassist?" I was this quirky, nerdy kid with dreadlocks who

Anthony McGill, principal clarinet in the New York Philharmonic, performs with the Gateways Music Festival Orchestra at the 2015 festival.



Rodney Allen Young



**Herb Smith** is third trumpet with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra in New York. He is an alumnus of the Eastman School of Music and began playing with the orchestra after graduating in 1991. He works with Young Audiences of America and the Rochester City School District Artist in Residence program. Smith travels throughout upstate N.Y. doing workshops and presentations on classical music for non-musicians. Smith plays many gigs with his jazz quartet and is a frequent substitute player for the Chautauqua and Buffalo Philharmonic orchestras. He is trumpet instructor for the Eastman Community Music School, and teaches trumpet from his home studio. He has played with many notable jazz and pop artists, and has played on many commercial jingles. Other ventures include composing music for silent films, writing musical arrangements for local bands, and a recent collaboration composing a full-length ballet for Garth Fagan Dance.

played oboe. No one at home thought it was awkward, but when I got into conservatory, a hyper-awareness came to me that, "I am a black kid playing classical music, and I guess that is strange."

**JESSE ROSEN:** What things give any of you some sense of hope that there will be greater opportunity for more African Americans in orchestras? Are you seeing things that look promising to you?

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** I don't see any impediments to there being more African-American players in orchestras. It's just trying to keep them in music, when you spot the talented ones. At Oberlin, if we spot somebody in elementary school, we stay with them—we've gotten a couple all the way through music degrees in college. Even then, it's hard to keep

them in the business, but I see plenty of opportunity. It's just getting them to stay. A lot of it is the culture thing Titus was talking about. We've figured out how to work our way through the culture, but honestly, if you're looking at it from the outside as a young person, you're thinking, "I don't know if I even want to be a part of this." It's a foreign country,

**"Orchestras need to advocate to make sure that instrumental programs are in city schools. To have the orchestral presence in a city advocating for music programs in schools, then maybe that kid with dreadlocks gets to play an instrument."** —Herb Smith

basically, and a lot to navigate. These days, with the world being a) very materialistic and b) wanting to do everything immediately, people want things right away, instead of working towards something like this, which is a slow build. I mean, I'm a conductor—and conductors aren't any good until they're about 50 years old. It's one thing to have talent as a conductor, but it takes years before you actually know anything. That's a long path for a kid to be looking down.

**LEE KOONCE:** The fact that music instruction is not prevalent in every classroom in the United States means that kids who might have a predilection for playing this music, or any other kind of music,

aren't given the opportunity. The few who get through and learn about instruments have to be persistent to go to the next level. It's difficult because there's not a critical mass of a million, or five million, kids in the country right now studying musical instruments. The majority of musicians currently in orchestras started playing in public school, and in losing that model of how to start musicians, not only did we lose many potential musicians, we lost audience members who would have an appreciation for the music because they played an instrument in the third, fourth, and fifth grade. And we've lost donors. That is a challenge for all of us because the feeder pool is absent in so many parts of the country.

Folks understand the slow-burn process in sports for becoming a great player, because professional athletes work hard to develop their skills. But we don't un-

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**–Lee Koonce**

derstand that kind of trajectory when it comes to classical music.

**TITUS UNDERWOOD:** Those are all super-valid points. But I want to talk about it from a different angle. Staying in this business is difficult. I've seen great black musicians not want to do it anymore—ones who were really good, going to some of the best conservatories, who don't want to do it anymore because of how they felt. It's tough for everybody in this business, everyone knows that. No one likes taking an audition, no one likes

sitting behind that screen. But staying in this business is about perception as well—about how African Americans are viewed. As Judy said, because of how we're viewed, it's jolting for some people to see African-American classical musicians. If I'm in a final round of an audition, I'm playing oboe, all these really sassy melodies, and then you see me come from behind the screen. I'm a 6'2" black guy playing the oboe. It's not something you see every day.

One thing that has been difficult is that most things African Americans see in the arts are charity cases or outreach programs. That level needs to be met, but there needs to be a level that exemplifies excellence as well. When you see other people who look like you performing at an exceptional level, that's what encourages. I see kids who want to be in music because they're like, “Wow, he's good at it and he's

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doing it in an orchestra. That's amazing." Rather than, "Yeah, I play oboe, I'm in this program for black people."

So it's very difficult and a very fine line. There needs to be more representation in the professional field showing African Americans at a high level. It's reaching out to other people who look like you—just as there need to be more female conductors or more female CEOs.

**"One of the hardest things with trying to keep African-American kids in the classical music business is them feeling enough support to think they can keep going."**

—Michael Morgan

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** We could use more black conductors, too, by the way. At this point, female conductors in terms of major orchestras are doing much better than black conductors.

**JUDY DINES:** For me, the hole where people are getting lost is making the transition into deciding that this is what they want to do. I live in Texas, where we have a pretty good band program—lots of kids are playing instruments, probably a lot more than in other states, which is great. A lot of kids play, but they drop off because they're not seeing people who look like them and not getting the idea that this is something they can do for a living. One thing that I hope would be a positive influence is YouTube, where you see orchestras all around the world, and you see more and more people of color in orchestras.

**JESSE ROSEN:** What should orchestras do? What would you wish to see orchestras do to be helpful? There are a lot of pieces to that question, but one is support and development of the talent pool. I'm struck by how consistent this theme is that you've all brought up: the discomfort of being the only one, and being in a cultural setting that doesn't feel like home. You're all in important roles in important orchestras. What would you have them do?

**TITUS UNDERWOOD:** A lot of people say, "We should search for more black musicians and put them in the orchestra," but we know that won't necessarily work because there's always the audition process and I am all about the audition process being fair. I am a big supporter of the [blind] audition process. However, I think that if African-American musicians were to reach back and train young musicians who were in conservatories at a competitive level, work with them, listen to their audition tapes, give them lessons, give them advice, had some sort of connection where we reached out—because people say there aren't a lot of black musicians. Well, there are quite a few who have gone through conservatories, who are freelancing and are really good. Let's take those people who have the potential to get into orchestras and train them. I'm a firm believer in the screen staying up in auditions. As a result of the screen, you raise the chances of more African Americans being in orchestras, so it's not this convoluted

out there in the field. Then we will have more African-American musicians succeeding at auditions.

Human beings tend to downplay the power of unconscious perception. If there's a bass trombone audition and someone is cranking it out better than everybody else behind the screen, and a one-hundred pound woman comes from behind the screen, that would be a little jarring at first, to be completely honest. That isn't who I envisioned—because that's what humans do, we're always trying to visualize. We're trying to connect the visual with the sound, and while that person is playing, you're processing how that person looks rather than listening to their playing. The screen takes that away, and you have to listen to what's coming across. By default, that will happen rather than the search-committee thing.

**LEE KOONCE:** I have a couple of things that I would add about what orchestras could do, from the perspective of someone who's worked on the administrative side in orchestras. First, this com-

**Titus Underwood** is acting associate principal oboe at the Utah Symphony | Utah Opera, which he joined in 2014. He recently received his Artist Diploma at the Colburn School, where he studied with Allan Vogel. He received his Master of Music from the Juilliard School, where he studied with Elaine Douvas, and pursued additional studies with Nathan Hughes and Pedro Diaz. He earned his Bachelor of Music at the Cleveland Institute of Music as a pupil of John Mack, legendary principal oboist of the Cleveland Orchestra. There he also studied with Frank Rosenwein and Jeffrey Rathbun. Underwood has performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Puerto Rico Symphony, Florida Orchestra, and San Diego Symphony. Festivals he has attended include Music Academy of the West, Breckenridge Music Festival, National Repertory Orchestra, Aspen Music Festival, and Canada's Domaine Forget.



thing where we're picking because it's race or we're picking because it's talent. The screen never lies. I know that the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra hires people from behind the screen—and that's arguably one of the best orchestras in the United States. However, I think that we need training, really hyper training after the conservatory, something like Gateways but also a clinic where we run you through the wringer, prepare you to get

community of classical musicians of African descent needs to see more representations of themselves in the world of classical music, as do those who are aspiring classical musicians. If an orchestra has a season and there's not one person of color as a guest soloist, I'm thinking "What in the world is going on here?" That's something that orchestras can change right now. There are so many talented classical musicians of African descent who could be solo-

ists with orchestras. Secondly, orchestras can begin to play music by composers of African descent in months other than February. Number three, the diversity of the staff and the board changes how the organization thinks—if there’s little or no diversity on your staff and your board, more than likely the way that organization thinks is not going to lead it to becoming a place of inclusion. When young black kids or kids of African descent see a diverse organization, they think, “Well, maybe that is not such a foreign place for me if I’m going to be an oboist and I’m 6’2” and I have dreadlocks. That orchestra could be a pretty cool place for me to play, because the staff is diverse, the board is diverse, and that’s not a foreign place.” Lastly, when we talk about musicians of African descent, while orchestras need good outreach programs, what type of mentoring is going on for aspiring professional musicians from seasoned orchestra

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players? Orchestras could look at conservatories and say, “There is this amazing black oboe player who we’re going to take under our wing. We’re going to make sure he has a chance to get into this orchestra, or some other orchestra, because we’re going to mentor that kid.” Those are things that orchestras can do. I can go on and on, but those are four things.

HERB SMITH: The other piece that needs to be put in place here—it’s like a shotgun effect, a broad stroke—is that

orchestras need to advocate to make sure that instrumental programs are in city schools. That’s so important. I went to a city school that had a music program, and that’s what got me going. Obviously you want to support the professionals now, but they’ve got to start somewhere—even if you get just one kid. To really have advocacy, to have the orchestral presence in the city advocating for music programs in schools, then maybe that kid with dreadlocks gets to play an instrument. That’s really important, but city schools are dropping music programs left and right. Yes, support professional and aspiring professional musicians, and also do the programs in the community. It’s both.

JUDY DINES: A mentoring program is really important. That way it’s not such a shock when people are moving into the next level—they know what to expect. Then people can figure out if that’s what they want to do. **S**

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