

Board Building for Arts and Cultural Organizations: New Challenges and Approaches

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Introduction

Many arts and cultural organizations in the Philadelphia region are beginning to experience challenges in building and sustaining their boards of directors. These organizations are having to work harder in the current climate to recruit qualified board members and fill open board positions. There are a number of factors at work including limitations on the available time of prospective board members and growth in the number of arts and culture and other nonprofit organizations seeking to recruit board members. Economic pressures and heightened governance concerns add to the mix. It is becoming apparent that a thoughtful assessment and some new and creative approaches are needed.

Growing Constraints on Board Recruitment

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According to a 2010 study by The Philadelphia

Foundation, the number of arts and cultural organizations in the region now stands at some 650 out of an estimated total of 15,000 nonprofits (The Philadelphia Foundation 2010). Those numbers attest to the significant size and breadth of Philadelphia's arts and culture, education and social service communities, but they also reflect a more competitive outlook for arts organizations in attracting civic and business leaders, arts patrons and others as board members.

As the demand for board members increases and longtime arts board members begin to step down, their potential successors are dealing with the new reality of contemporary life. Faced with already heavy time commitments, some prospective board members are concluding that they are simply too busy to accept additional volunteer responsibilities. For the 30- to 50-year-old cohort of "younger" professionals who are highly desired as board candidates, childrearing responsibilities and accelerating career advancement can merge, leaving little, or no, time for nonprofit board service. At the other end of the age spectrum, many older people are working longer and, even if retired, are likely to be engaged in a variety of active leisure pursuits.

Discretionary time and control over one's schedule are increasingly rare commodities among prospective board members. Work demands are at the peak of intensity and multi-tasking is the norm on handheld devices that enable a constant flow of interactive communications with

colleagues, friends and family. Conserving personal time is more important than ever.

Additional constraints on board member recruitment include the need to identify board candidates who are passionate about the specific art form represented by the organization and who can also provide financial support in proportion to the organization's requirements. Economic conditions over the last several years have reduced the charitable giving capacity of many arts patrons while the pressing needs of several of the largest arts and cultural organizations, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, are assuming priority in the giving decisions of many of the region's most generous and longstanding arts supporters. Yet Philadelphia-area arts organizations of all sizes must deal with unpredictable fluctuations in earned income as well as declining government and corporate support; new board members who can make major gifts are needed more urgently than ever.

Heightened expectations for transparency in nonprofit operations and accountability for financial and program outcomes are raising the bar even further on board members' fiduciary responsibilities. Prospective board members are appropriately more cautious in accepting such responsibilities, requiring more information in the decision-making process and expressing greater need for confidence in management both at the outset and throughout the term of their board service.

With the operating complexities facing many arts organizations and the increasing responsibilities of board service, we can expect that the task of recruiting board members who bring with them the triple advantages of available time, interest and financial capacity will be a continuing challenge for all but the most prominent arts organizations.

A Long-Term Threat

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There is also a long-term issue that may affect the availability of board members well into the future. The vast majority of today's high school and college students are growing up in a world that encourages their focus on self rather than community needs and public service.

Elimination of arts education in public schools means that few students are enjoying direct personal experience with classical music, theatre, dance, visual art and film. In addition to the inevitable negative effect upon future audiences for the arts, we can anticipate a similar decline in the pool of future-generation candidates for board and other volunteer positions at arts organizations.

The impact of a vibrant arts and cultural community on our region is incalculable. Recently, *Travel and Leisure* magazine ranked Philadelphia as the number one city in the country for arts and culture as part of its America's favorite cities feature (Travel and Leisure 2011).

This is much more than mere Chamber of Commerce rhetoric or tourist promotion; it is a quality-of-life statement for all Philadelphians. Through the arts, the community communicates across racial and ethnic lines using the common language of perception and meaning. The arts feed our natural hunger for escape and entertainment, help build neighborhoods and foster economic vitality. Ensuring success and long life for the region's nonprofit arts organizations in the decades to come must be a major priority for the health and wellbeing of all who live here.

Speaking to Today's Reality: Clarifying the Value of Board Membership

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To respond to the new reality of today's world, arts organizations will need to become strategic and creative in attracting new board members and volunteers. Perhaps most important, they must evaluate and communicate to the prospective board member the personal value that he or she will gain from joining the organization.

In the past, a simple construct defined the board member-organizational relationship from the organization's perspective. Roughly stated, it went something like this:

You (board member) are expected to give your time, talent and treasure to us (organization). By serving the public good and becoming involved with arts programs and activities in which you are interested, you will be happy and fulfilled.

Now, however, it is much more complicated than that. Whereas in previous eras board members may have been somewhat willing to sit through purposeless meetings, write checks upon request, and overlook when necessary examples of poor management practices or inconsistent leadership, such is not the case today. The board member-organization dynamic has transitioned to an energetic collaboration in which board members take an active role in oversight and ensuring accountability. Board members expect that the organization will pay attention to them, value their contributions (both intellectual and financial) and show interest and concern for their needs. Today's board members simply will not be taken for granted.

Engagement, rather than passive acquiescence, is the order of the day. Yet engagement takes time, and lots of it. Why should prospective board members who are time-stressed and extremely careful about the commitments they make agree to become engaged?

Increasingly, the answer will lie in the anticipated value of the board experience to a prospective member. Savvy arts organizations will begin to identify what prospective

members are looking to gain from their board service, how exactly they wish to achieve their personal goals, and then “contract” with the prospective board member to help them achieve these goals.

Some board members may be interested in leadership roles, with the opportunity to make a significant difference in organizational strategic direction and board functioning. Others may prefer less visibility but want behind-the-scenes access to important people, including artists, and the opportunity to participate in private activities of the organization that are open only to a few people. Some business professionals may desire exposure to aspects of the organization, such as marketing or finance, that they do not normally encounter doing their regular jobs. Virtually all board members want to make new friends and share in the life of the organizational “family.” These social associations are one of the most important aspects of board membership and should be given significant priority.

Every board member, both new and old, has personal goals for board service even if they remain unspoken. It is incumbent upon organizations to find out what those goals are before a board member is elected in order to ensure accurate mutual expectations. In the future, more and more organizations and their board members will agree to specific actions that the organization can take to help the board member maximize the perceived value of board service. Included in the board member engagement

plan could be such activities as introducing the board member to other arts and community leaders, announcing personal and professional accomplishments to a wide audience (such as on a website), rotation through board committees of special interest, leadership development opportunities, and training needs. The engagement plan should be evaluated by both the organization and the board member on an annual basis to ensure the integrity of the effort.

Special attention will need to be placed upon the engagement of active career businesspeople who are often simultaneously raising families and fulfilling major responsibilities at work. For these board members, regular attendance at meetings and organizational special events may prove difficult, if not impossible. While accommodations can sometimes be made, such as calling into meetings, these board members clearly require a high level of personal attention outside the normal channels in order to keep them up to date on the organization's activities and participating in board activities. The time that will be required of board leadership and staff in engaging such prospective board members should be considered when they are being recruited. Otherwise, it is likely that the relationship will founder and the potential value of the interaction to the board member and the organization will not be achieved.

It has become best practice for organizations to codify board member responsibilities in writing, including

expectations for meeting attendance, financial support, public advocacy and so on. Today, it is equally important for organizations formally to state their own responsibilities in ensuring the value of the time and resources that board members give. For example, organizations owe board members their best effort to keep meetings to a minimum, to ensure that agendas are thoughtfully constructed, that meeting materials are sent out in advance, that board members will be consulted on appropriate matters according to their areas of responsibility and expertise, that board member comments and advice will be heard and carefully considered, and that the most appropriate avenues for each board member to contribute will be pursued. The energetic collaboration between board members and organizations must work both ways if board members are to feel truly valued.

Philadelphia is fortunate to have excellent external resources for board development. The Arts and Business Council and the LaSalle University Nonprofit Center, for example, offer assistance with board training and placement. Additionally, there are online services for board matching such as BoardNet and several local affinity groups that also offer online nonprofit board matching. These services can be helpful tools in identifying board candidates. Because they are external resources, however, they should not be used to replace the organization's own internal process of working with

board prospects to learn their interests, the value they expect to gain from board membership and their overall fit with the organization.

Developing Cross-Organizational Board Relationships

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Philadelphia's diverse arts community means that many people sit on more than one arts board. These board members, themselves active arts consumers, represent a vast storehouse of knowledge of the community, its arts organizations, civic and nonprofit leadership structures, problems and opportunities. Although in-depth personal relationships and networks certainly exist across boards, more could be done to harness the power of these highly engaged and knowledgeable groups of volunteers.

Going forward, the community may benefit from the development of structured cross-organizational relationships between and among arts boards. Alliances of this sort could create a broader focal point for the discussion of issues and problems facing the nonprofit arts community, public funding challenges and solutions, regional issues that affect the environment for the arts, and opportunities for shared approaches across organizations that minimize duplication and maximize impact.

For board members, these cross-organizational interfaces would add another layer of engagement, with a largely city-wide or regional focus. They could go a long way toward furthering board members' perception of the value they gain from arts board membership and encourage others to consider joining them.

Developing Future Arts Volunteers and Board Leaders

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Developing future arts volunteers and board leaders will be as important as nourishing future audiences for the arts if nonprofit arts organizations are to thrive in the years ahead. Few high school and college students have the opportunity for exposure to the large and diverse community of arts organizations, nor to learn about the possibilities for arts volunteerism. A tiny few will gain such exposure in college, electing arts management as a career track and in the process learning about nonprofit governance and the role of boards.

Nearly all nonprofit arts organizations are responding to the disturbing lack of arts education in the public schools by offering programs that expose children and youth to the various art forms. Some organizations make these activities their exclusive focus and millions of dollars are raised annually from foundations, corporations and

individuals to support them. This is both appropriate and necessary.

It would, however, seem advantageous also to develop programs that communicate to students beginning in high school the nature and diversity of the nonprofit arts community. Even for students who do participate in the arts while they are young, the overwhelming majority will not earn a living from art. Wouldn't it make sense to offer them another idea, that of continuing to participate as an arts volunteer? Programs for high school students in which they could learn about and observe the inner workings of nonprofit arts organizations might just establish a connection that could last a lifetime, and create a new pool of future arts board members and leaders.

Without some structured effort to address the long-term availability of arts volunteers, and employing new approaches in recruiting and working with board members that continue to enhance the perceived value of board service, the region ultimately may not be able sustain the diverse array of arts organizations that we have today. We should do all we can now to avoid such a possibility.

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