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Why Boards Don't Need to Be Bored: New Challenges and Best Practices for Not-for-Profit Boards, part 1 Joan Lancourt

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This is part one of a three part series on not-for-profit boards.

For ten years before I retired, I was a coach in an executive development program at the Kennedy School's Hauser Center for Non Profit Organizations. Over those ten years, I worked with fifty executive directors from across the U.S. as they transformed their boards from underutilized resource to active partners in taking their organization to its next level of development. In the course of that work, I came to believe, as do Chait, Ryan and Taylor in *Governance as Leadership**, that we are not asking too much of our not-for-profit boards; rather, we are asking too little. According to these authors, "Boards are bored!" and it shows—in skipped meetings, perfunctory participation, and little ownership of outcomes.

Their research indicates that boards must engage in three types of work in order to effectively provide the active leadership required for sustainable success in a rapidly changing world.

- **Fiduciary:** This is where most boards focus their energy and find a participatory role in the organization.
- **Strategic:** Many boards are also engaged in some aspects of the strategic planning process, contributing to and approving a staff created draft. Most, however, are only minimally involved in the implementation of the adopted plan.
- **Generative:** This is where the heart of board activity should occur, but rarely does.

Why are so few boards taking advantage of the powerful legitimacy of their governance role to provide *proactive leadership* to their organizations by engaging in the generative work that is at the heart of what a board has to offer? Digging deeper, and earlier in the process, prior to strategic planning,

It is the generative conversations that help an organization confront its complex, often ambiguous, rapidly changing environment; an environment in which finding effective solutions to problems is not immediately obvious, may require on-going experimentation, and almost always requires some level of organizational change.

Chait, Ryan and Taylor are also very clear about the need for effective boards to operate in all three modes (fiduciary, strategic and generative) at appropriate times.

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When I became board chair at Underground Railway Theater at Central Square Theater in Cambridge, I was anxious to find out what the norms and best practices were for not-for-profit theater boards. I decided to begin by talking with boards of theaters that seemed particularly engaged around key issues of audience engagement, innovation, and artist support to see if these were boards that operated according to the tri-modal approach provided in *Governance as Leadership*. Polly Carl, HowlRound's director, generously contacted some artistic and managing directors and asked them to put me in touch with their board chairs. From those contacts, I was able to interview almost a dozen board chairs**.

The Questions

I asked everyone I interviewed the same set of questions:

- How did they see their role as chair and what are their relationships to their theater's leadership?
- What are the more innovative things their theaters are doing, and what role has the board played in those innovations?
- I also focused on how they were responding to a number of truly generative issues facing virtually every theater across the country—how were they working to broaden and more fully engage their audiences, and supporting new work and the artists who make it?
- How were they navigating sustainability in relationship to their not-for-profit missions?
- How were they working to deepen the engagement of their board members in the artistic work of the theater, recruit the board talent they needed, and improve the functioning of the board to effectively provide increased leadership as part of their generative function?

I promised the board chairs I would be aggregating the information rather than presenting case studies, so for now, I have not identified any best practice with a specific theater. No theater is text-book perfect, but I was excited to find that there is a great deal going on; so many experiments, and most promising of all, a growing realization that boards do need to become more proactive if their theaters are to continue being successful in meeting the daunting challenges of the future.

The Board as an Early Partner in Generative Issues:

One board chair told me, "Our goal is to become a strategic organization not just an organization with a strategic plan." Another commented, "Financial health is only one piece of a healthy organization, and if we create a healthy theater it will have a positive effect on the whole local theater scene."

While there was certainly a continuum in terms of how frequently a board operated in the generative mode, virtually all the board chairs viewed their role as a proactive partnership with their theater's leadership, meeting regularly, some every week, sometimes talking four to eight times a week, to discuss current and future issues affecting their theaters. Creating an open culture—defined as one in which both staff and board feel a sense of trust, and are unafraid to raise difficult issues and questions—is viewed as a key part of their role as board chair, and as key to a successful partnership. This was especially true for two of the theaters that had been through difficult financial crises. For them, a major learning had been the absolute importance of board and staff being able to trust each other enough to share "bad news." "We have to be able to ask the tough questions." The consequences of shying away from conflict had been dire.

Central to generative discussions is the organization's mission. "We talk about our mission at every meeting. It's on everything we put out," one board chair told me.

Indeed, most of the boards see themselves as the keepers of the mission, and several board chairs indicated that board meetings are focusing more and more on the kinds of deeper conversations required to ensure that all the theater's programs embody that mission. One board, after such a conversation, decided to end its educational program because they felt it was not really advancing their mission.

With some regularity, several boards have been devoting multiple board meetings to the discussion and exploration of a single key issue. These discussions sometimes function as a sounding board for the theater's leadership (who are typically members of the board) but they were often more than that; the discussions go to the heart of the theater's purpose. The single key issues included:

- Access (physical, cultural, demographic, and socio-economic).
- The support of new work.
- How to address ongoing societal issues such as gentrification and racism.
- Making audience development and engagement activities central to the artistic productions rather than add-ons, and creating multiple entry points to the artistic experience (e.g. blogs, games, teaser performances in public spaces, and online programs).
- Sustaining and deepening community relationships formed during each production, and experimenting, evaluating, and learning and folding the learning into the next experiment.

As the boards, in partnership with staff, wrestled with these issues over several meetings, they considered not only the issue itself, but the barriers to overcome, how to deal with the ways in which their message to funders would need to change, what alternative business models and donor bases they needed to explore and develop, how their organizational structures and cultures might need to change, and how to better balance their deeply held values with the pragmatic requirements of their short term needs—*all in order to better support the kinds of artistic work embodied in their missions.*

Anecdotal Outcomes

How to develop new audiences has become the \$64,000 question facing most boards. There could hardly be a more generative issue for boards to chew on, and an interesting range of possible approaches are emerging to address this question:

- After a number of difficult discussions, spanning multiple board meetings, one board, concerned about access issues related to diversity and inclusion, developed its Radical Hospitality Program, providing a significant number of free seats to non-traditional audiences on a first-come, first-served basis. To support this program, the theater made significant changes to its message to funders, but this “bet the ranch” decision has paid off so far.
- Another board, focused on how to make the audience more central to the artistic process, created a season-long Connectivity Plan (rather than production by production). This plan included a range of experiments (“When you know you need to do something different, but you don’t quite know what”)—from lobby displays, resources posted on the theater’s website, post show discussions held in several neighborhood bars, to inviting local bloggers and other opinion leaders to early previews to “help the play catch fire.”
- One theater’s generative conversations resulted in a pilot program called On the Job. For this project, the theater contacted local corporations about their experience with diversity and inclusion issues. Based on that experience, and their belief that live theater makes people more open to difficult conversations, the theater wrote a play that addressed the corporation’s experience with this issue. It then performed the play for the employees as a way to spark deeper

discussions and action on the issues. An initial pilot has been successful, and the board has begun to explore what it will take in the way of additional resources to expand this program.

- At another theater, new audience development began six months prior to the presentation of its production of “To Kill a Mockingbird.” In this instance the theater partnered with the city libraries to develop a program called The Big Read. With twenty community partners, teen nights, and a host of other activities, 36,000 people were engaged in exploring the issues raised by the play.
- Still another company, in conjunction with its production of *Clybourne Park*, sponsored bus tours of various neighborhoods, and used a photojournalism project as an additional way to engage a broader audience in the issues raised by the play.
- Another board’s multi-meeting discussion of how to support new works resulted in the board’s undertaking a “Free the Beast” campaign to raise four million dollars to support new work over a ten-year period.
- Other generative board conversations have ranged from “Should we hire only local actors?” to “Should we buy several condos to house actors from out of town?”

Generative conversations enabled theaters that had addressed their fiscal crises to successfully reinvent themselves. “Who are we, who can we become, and how do we put in place structures and process that will ensure that this crisis doesn’t occur again?”

Generative board activity is core to both the missions and the on-going success of each theater. It was clear in my interviews that these were not easy conversations, but as full partners in addressing issues related to the current and future success of their theaters, these boards, in partnership with their staffs, have engaged *early in the process* not only in framing the questions to be asked, but in developing the shape of the potential solutions. Dare I venture to say, this is as it should be! This is the kind of board work that is anything but boring. It challenges people’s creativity, it expands their knowledge, it deepens their understanding of and commitment to the mission, it is an exciting collaboration and synthesis of many different perspectives, and it builds board as well as individual capacities. This is the kind of board work that says to prospective board members, “We need you for more than your money. We need your mind, your heart, and your varied experiences and skills. Come help us build our continued success.”

* Governance as Leadership Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards Chait, Ryan & Taylor; BoardSource, and John Wiley & Sons, 2005

The Practitioner’s Guide to Governance as Leadership Building High-Performing Nonprofit Boards, Trower, Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint, 2013

** Interviews with current or past board chairs of Ten Thousand Things; Miracle Theatre Group; Rude Mechanicals; Company One; Penumbra; Mixed Blood; Contemporary American Theater Festival; Intiman Theatre Festival; Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company.

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