

Testimonial

February 29, 2020

“This past December I finished up eight years of service to the CNE, first on the Philanthropy Day Host Committee and later as a board member. I am deeply grateful as I reflect on all that I learned during my involvement with the CNE. Thanks to hours of meetings, trainings and conversations throughout our community, my leadership has matured, my understanding of nonprofits has deepened, and perhaps most important, my attention to board culture has sharpened.

I recently had a fascinating, if challenging, opportunity to put into practice some of what I now know about the centrality of board culture to the overall health of nonprofit organizations. I currently serve on the board of a large arts organization outside of Virginia. It will come as no surprise that such organizations have a built-in tension between their artistic mission (how can we best inspire our audiences?) and their bottom line (how we will pay for those inspirational performances?). The most successful arts organizations find ways to hold these two equally important aspects in balance, though that balance can be tenuous.

This past fall, our organization lost its balance big time. A long brewing conflict between the performers and the Executive Director blew up. The antagonism was made all the more corrosive by the speed and polarizing effect of the Internet, where disgruntled people aired their grievances, made demands of the board, and indulged in exaggeration. As a result, both the ED and the Board Chair resigned, and the board was astir with confusion, anger and worry for the future of the organization.

Fortunately, three leaders emerged on our board. They put in huge amounts of time reworking our Bylaws as a bulwark against similar chaos in the future and doing the legwork of finding an Interim ED. In addition, they began re-examining our committee structures, our fundraising prospects, and our communications with the community. All in all, they have been heroes.

What they didn't address, however, was the morale of the board in the wake of these upheavals. It's not that they were clueless or dismissive of how the board was feeling, but they were simply so busy keeping the ship afloat that they didn't have sufficient time to focus on board dynamics. That's where I was able to pitch in, thanks to my experience at the CNE, where we devote considerable attention to board culture.

Within two weeks, not only had our ED and our Board Chair resigned, but so did our Director of Development and our Marketing Director, so you can imagine how these blows to the organization felt to our board members. It seemed clear to me that, at the very least, we needed to take some time to collectively acknowledge these losses. To that end, I tried to do two things during our emergency conference calls — articulate the emotional effects of this crisis, and express gratitude to those who had emerged as leaders. While these gestures may seem obvious, it's amazing how we forget to make them



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when we're under pressure.

Even before this crisis developed, our board lacked cohesion. Partly, that was a result of the fact that we live in different cities across the country, so we are rarely altogether in the same room. At each board meeting, at least a third of our members are on the phone or absent. In addition, there was no orientation for new members, so there was no consistent structure for welcoming new people to their board service or for passing along the history, values, and traditions that make up the organization's culture. Again, thanks to my CNE training, I was able to help the staff create an effective orientation, better engage members not in the room for meetings by using Zoom, bring on new members at the beginning of the summer festival rather than at its conclusion, and tighten up the overall annual schedule of board and committee meetings so that members can plan out their attendance a year in advance.

I am happy to say that our organization now has an excellent Interim ED in place, our communication with our audience has improved, our Artistic Director has committed to reaching out to frustrated donors, and our board leadership has been stabilized. As is always the case with a large board, there is a core of "worker-bee" members that has emerged to do the hard work ahead of us, and the morale among that group is optimistic and full of mutual goodwill. We are increasingly attending to the details, both structural and psychological, that will lead to a truly healthy board culture. To the extent that I have been able to contribute to this positive momentum, I have the Center for Nonprofit Excellence to thank."

~ **Kakie Brooks**, former CNE Board Chair