

Four Interconnected Practices That Strengthen Board Resiliency

Rebekah Lambert, Senior Vice President

Nonprofit arts and culture organizations are dynamic and complicated institutions, constantly balancing artistic vision, service to the community, the needs and hopes of multiple stakeholder groups, financial resource constraints, and much more. Factor in a CEO transition, a void in board leadership, significant cash flow issues, labor strife, or any other complex situation that may occur, and an organization can easily find itself in what a volunteer leader recently described as “an extraordinary, tender, and unaligned intersection of principles and positions.” How can organizations prepare to meet those challenges?

In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we will explore four interconnected practices and recommend a handful of activities to strengthen board resiliency, preparing boards of directors to successfully lead their organizations through difficult and delicate times.

Defining Resiliency

Let's start with definitions. In *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, Andrew Zoll and Ann Marie Healy “frame resilience in terms borrowed from both ecology and sociology as the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.”¹ Similarly, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation (Bechtel Foundation) considers organizational resiliency to be “the capacity to respond effectively to change, to adapt successfully to new and unforeseen conditions and circumstances—and to seize opportunity. It's an essential characteristic of organizations that are built for ongoing success.”² The resiliency of arts and culture boards of directors thus refers to the ability of those groups of volunteer leaders to guide their organizations through turbulent times, upholding mission, vision, and values through change and ensuring the long-term success of their organizations.

Practice #1: Build Trust and Collaborate

Zoll and Healy explore several themes related to resiliency. “The most important of these is the critical role of trust and cooperation—people's ability to collaborate when it counts.”³ But how does a board enhance its sense of trust for one another and its ability to collaborate effectively in challenging situations? Research reported in *Harvard Business Review* looked at 55 large teams that demonstrated high levels of collaborative behavior.⁴ Several of that study's findings are directly applicable to boards of directors, including mentoring new board members; ensuring that the roles and responsibilities of individual board members, committees, and the board as a whole are clearly defined and well understood; and investing in building and maintaining social relationships. BoardSource's *Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of National Board Practices* report affirms that “the board is a team, and teams work better when the members know each other.” It also found “a strong relationship between perceived board impact on organizational performance and one particular area of board culture: the extent to which the board functions as a collaborative team working toward a common goal.”⁵

¹ Zoll and Ann Marie Healy, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, (Free Press, 2012), 7.

² “Resiliency Guide,” S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, March 2016, 3, <http://sdbjrfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ResiliencyGuide.pdf>.

³ Zoll and Healy, *supra*, 14-15.

⁴ Lynda Gratton and Tamara J. Erickson, “Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 2007, <https://hbr.org/2007/11/eight-ways-to-build-collaborative-teams>.

⁵ *Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of National Board Practices*, BoardSource, 2017, 26 and 48.

Practice #2: Cultivate a Culture of Learning

The Bechtel Foundation identifies a “culture of learning” as its first resiliency factor, acknowledging that “organizational resiliency is shaped in part by the depth of an organization’s commitment to learning, improving, and adapting.” Resilient boards of directors prioritize board education and seek opportunities to learn and explore together. Especially during those complicated situations previously mentioned, board members need to be practiced at thinking strategically and asking incisive questions to help them understand complex and often rapidly developing issues. As pointed out in *Leading with Intent*, a “commitment to ongoing reflection and learning is critical in an environment characterized by fast-paced change.”⁶

Practice #3: Encourage Diverse Perspectives

The composition of a nonprofit board of directors affects how it leads and therefore its resiliency. *Leading with Intent* asserts that “a board that is homogeneous in any way risks having blind spots that negatively impact its ability to make the best decisions and plans for the organization.”⁷ Zolli and Healy put it this way: “Diversity plays an enormous role in resilience and is one of its most important correlates...increasing the diversity of a system’s constituent parts ensures the widest palette of latent, ready responses to disruption.”⁸ Board members who express differing perspectives—ones who ask questions from the lens of diverse backgrounds and expertise—stimulate broader thinking about issues facing an organization, thus enhancing the decision-making capacity of the board as a whole. A varied group of board members also helps ensure that members are aware of trends and changes across the breadth of the organization’s external environment and how those trends are relevant to the organization. They provide what the Bechtel Foundation identifies as “context (outside-in thinking).” However, emphasizing the interconnectivity of these practices, diversity of perspective bears fruit only when board members are comfortable expressing and responding to minority or dissenting opinions, which relates back to building a team in which board members know and trust each other and have a track record of collaboration.⁹

Practice #4: Facilitate Collective Leadership

The Bechtel Foundation acknowledges that “...a leader’s approach to guiding and aligning people’s efforts...can enhance or inhibit an organization’s resiliency.” Indeed, when Zolli and Healy “found a resilient community or organization, [they] almost always found a very particular species of leader at or near its core...these *translational leaders* play a critical role...connecting constituencies, and weaving various networks, perspectives, knowledge systems, and agendas into a coherent whole.”¹⁰ Similarly, the *Harvard Business Review* study identified that “at companies where the senior executives demonstrate highly collaborative behavior themselves, teams collaborate well.”¹¹ Boards of directors are more resilient when board chairs encourage collective leadership rather than acting as authority figures.

Four Activities to Enhance Resiliency

Board chairs and nonprofit executives already have a lot on their plates. Adding a complex program to enhance board resiliency probably sounds daunting. But, how about just a handful of easily scalable and implementable activities that connect all four resiliency practices while also building overall board effectiveness? Here are some initial suggestions to help get you started:

- **Practices 1 and 2:** Schedule a behind-the-scenes board education activity. Attend rehearsal (maybe even sit on stage!) and have a discussion with the artistic director and/or an artist. Do a gallery walk with a senior curator. Adapt a hands-on youth education activity for board members.
- **Practices 1 and 3:** Encourage the idea that board service can and should be rewarding and even fun. Invite board members and their spouses or partners to a social gathering before or after a performance or exhibit opening to build camaraderie, relationships, and a sense of team.

⁶ Board Source, *supra*, 35.

⁷ *Leading With Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practice*, BoardSource, 2017, 12.

⁸ Zolli, *supra*, 15.

⁹ Charlan Nemeth, *In Defense of Troublemakers: The Power of Dissent in Life and Business*, (Basic Books, 2018), 176.

¹⁰ Zolli, *supra*, 15.

¹¹ Gratton and Erickson, *supra*.

- **Practices 2, 3, and 4:** Restructure a couple of upcoming board meetings to build the habit of discussion, question, and engagement with strategic issues. Take half the meeting for “consent and non-action items that are essentially reporting” and “half the meeting [for] strategic discussions, including policies, best practices, fundraising, and associated capital, strategic, or program plan updates...”¹²
- **Practices 2, 3, and 4:** Set aside time at a board meeting or summit for a discussion about the value of diversity of perspective on the board. Consider questions like: Whose voice is missing (or perhaps already there but unheard)? Why would those voices strengthen the board and its capacity to govern and lead? Are there any barriers to board service that need to be addressed in order to authentically bring these perspectives to the table?

History and experience, our understanding of organizational dynamics and development, and the complex world in which we operate—all of these elements assure us that nonprofit arts and culture organizations will face challenging and complicated situations that require volunteer board leaders to step up and lead with integrity and perseverance. To prepare for those worst of tender times, while also enhancing governance in the best of times, an investment in building board resiliency makes good sense.



Rebekah Lambert, Senior Vice President

Ms. Lambert joined ACG in November 2009 with more than 19 years of experience in performing arts management, planning, board development, policy formulation, union negotiations, artistic administration, operations, and program planning. Throughout her career, she has proven herself to be a thoughtful, creative, and flexible leader. Prior to joining ACG, Ms. Lambert held positions at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Young Musicians Foundation, the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra (now known as Hawaii Symphony Orchestra), and Symphony of Southeast Texas. From 1996 to 2003, Ms. Lambert served as Executive Director of the Eugene Symphony, where she completed eight concert seasons with surpluses and doubled the orchestra's endowment fund. During her tenure, the orchestra experienced unprecedented stability and artistic growth. Ms. Lambert also served on the board of directors of the League of American Orchestras and as faculty of the Orchestra Leadership Academy. She is a certified Strategic

Management Professional and previously served as President of the board of directors of ShelterCare, an Oregon-based housing and human services organization. Ms. Lambert holds a bachelor of music degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara, master of business administration from the Yale School of Organization and Management, and strategic management certificate from The George Washington University and Strategy Management Group.

**Contact ACG for more information on how we can help your organization
build a more effective and resilient board of directors.**

**(888) 234.4236
info@artsconsulting.com
ArtsConsulting.com**

¹² Wyona Lynch-McWhite, “Arts and Culture Leadership: Four Action Steps to Create a Stronger Board,” *Arts Insights*, May 2017, <http://artsconsulting.com/arts-insights/arts-and-culture-leadership-four-action-steps-to-create-a-stronger-board/>