



THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE RESOURCES

BORED OF DIRECTORS?

By Will Maitland Weiss

They don't give enough, or they just plain don't give. They don't know what's going on. They don't buy tickets to the show/gala/anything. Worse than complaining, they don't even show up for meetings. They don't get their friends to buy tickets to the show/gala/anything. Worse still, they come to the meeting and spend it yawning...

[By the way, there is a corollary: the frustration(s) trustees have with staff. We won't go there in this piece, just be aware it can be equally valid.]

Know that EVERY successful arts organization has an engaged Board. EVERY struggling arts organization (and most not-so-struggling) blames shortcomings on its ineffective board. You need Board development, you need Board orientation, you need a viable plan for Board-staff communication; these can be complex, they need to fit the unique mission/goals/objectives/ history/situation/personalities of the organization, they take time—and are always worth the effort.

But here are three suggestions which we at CCR end up making to many clients (of different sizes, arts disciplines, and longevities):

1) **TERM LIMITS.** For the Board, as in: you can serve two, consecutive three-year terms and then you are required to rotate off the board. Nearly all academic institutions have term limits; they are typical in non-profit healthcare; they are less typical in the arts, where (a) there are some stellar super-patrons who no one would ever want to rotate off a board, and (b) there are some institutions whose trustees make six-figure gifts, annually supplying a huge chunk of the contributed income. But be realistic: does this describe your organization?

Term limits work in three ways. They give each trustee a finite, manageable **time frame** in which to accomplish what s/he hopes to accomplish. (Often a first term is spent "learning" the organization and, for those who become excited and engaged, a second term is spent showing what they can do.) You can figure out which of your friends/connections you are going to hit up for what because... in just three-two-one more year(s), you know that you will no longer be needling them to buy the gala tickets. Secondly, term limits are the only **gracious** way to get rid of the (dreaded!) "dead wood." No one needs to be embarrassed or offended. Every organization talks

about how they will throw members off who don't meet their responsibilities... and then it doesn't happen. And forget the fear that the Good Board Member will be lost, after her/his terms are completed. No! You can keep them on a Committee; you can keep them on an Advisory Council; you can keep them active through your donor stewardship. Finally, term limits force a Board (and staff) to look for **New Blood** every year. Force the work of the Nominating Committee on to the agenda at every Board meeting. Where, for your success, it needs to be.

2) **BAD COMMITTEES/GOOD COMMITTEES.** Every organization needs a Development Committee... why do they often **not** work? No one joined your board because s/he wants to raise money (many will outright tell you that they can't or they won't; they can and they will—but not by being “punished” with Development Committee duty). No one wants to be responsible for filling the bottomless pit, and no matter how much money you raise, it is never enough, and it always all needs to be raised again the next month/year/campaign. What people do respond to is Programming. Have a New Works Committee, or a Commissioning Committee, or a Classics Committee, or a Young Artists Committee, or an Education Committee... The goal for each is not to have trustees and other Committee volunteers decide what play to produce, what choreography to commission, what music to take to the public schools—those are staff responsibilities. The Committee's job is to understand the opportunities, understand the needs being served, understand the resources required, and to brainstorm, advocate, and act to Make It Happen. Get The Resources. Solve The Problem. Create The Success. The other thing about Committees: the work has to have a beginning, middle, and end (no bottomless pits!). That's why a Benefit Committee can succeed as can even a Capital Campaign Committee of several years duration. They have an end in sight. Set a realistic goal, go crazy with celebration when you accomplish it, and then let those Committee members go home. The best of them, those who contributed (in several senses) the most, will have had such a good experience that they will be the first to sign up for another challenge, another Committee.

(Post Script: Committees other than just Development can be perceived as dreary as well. They need not be. Make each Committee experience a positive opportunity for volunteers to work with staff and triumph over your organization's challenges.)

(Another Post Script: when people say “*our whole Board is the Development Committee,*” that generally means no one is taking responsibility for fundraising. Take your three best Board members, and start an ad hoc Committee to solve a real problem. Let other Board members start wondering how they, too, can be a part of the real work—which oh my yes includes fundraising!—of the organization. Then let them become part of that real work.)

3) **PARTNERSHIP.** Stop rolling your eyes! This isn't your NEA application... Yeah, yeah; whatever is going down, you are going to generate development

“boilerplate”/rhetoric about how closely and well your Board and staff work together. But this is just a word of caution about *The Two Realities* of the **Real Partnerships** you are (or are not) going to form.

Reality #1 = if you, the Executive/Artistic/Managing/Whatever Director do not develop meaningful, honest, *partnership* relationships with multiple Board members, you will never raise enough money. Period.

Reality #2 = once you do have those relationships, you will be LESS IN CONTROL of your organization. Because you will be sharing control. You will actually listen to these Board members, and sometimes they will persuade you to change your mind about things. This is not a bad thing; it is healthy, it is a part of the growth process. Founding Artists sometimes find it scary, sometimes find it unacceptable. Just a case of being careful what you wish for.