

**Governance Volunteers of Arts Organizations:  
Volunteer Resource Management Considerations**

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**Abstract**

*This exploratory qualitative research utilized grounded theory to examine the experience of volunteers serving on nonprofit boards of directors in arts organizations. By examining the perspectives of the governance volunteers it is evident that proper and thorough volunteer administration practice could enrich the performance of individual board members and therefore impact the volunteer board's overall effectiveness.*

**Key Words:**

volunteer, administration, management, board

**Introduction**

The exploratory research presented in this paper addresses the question of the role of professional volunteer resource managers in impacting the work of governance boards. Board members (also known as directors, trustees, or governors) are volunteers. We argue, therefore, that the basic principles of volunteer administration apply as much to the board as to any other volunteer in the organization.

Volunteer administration as a profession addresses the broad range of competencies required by practitioners to be effective in developing, managing, and sustaining effective volunteer programs. The profession also addresses the competencies required by volunteer resource managers to fulfill their roles with

both volunteers and paid staff within their organization.

The literature on volunteer resource management does not currently address how a volunteer resource manager works with board or governance volunteers. In addition, literature on governance does not examine how the volunteer administration needs of governance volunteers are being addressed by the board itself. Typical bylaw structures of nonprofit organizations make the board itself responsible for the recruitment, development, and evaluation of volunteer members coming onto the board. Reviews of dozens of examples of bylaw by the authors have demonstrated that boards of directors do not reflect an understanding of basic volunteer resource management practice, nor consider using the organization's volunteer resource

management professional to support the board's recruitment, orientation, training or evaluation of volunteers serving on the board.

The authors' work with governors over the past three years (Angelini & Seel, 2007, 2008; Seel, 2006) suggests that volunteer resource managers are often not involved in board member recruitment, retention activities, or exiting processes. In part, this may be due to a generalized lack of information about the particular nature and role of the governance volunteer as an actual volunteer within the nonprofit organization.

This article presents findings from a peer learning circle of governance volunteers from arts and arts-serving organizations. Their experience compelled the authors to encourage the increased use of volunteer resource management practices with governance volunteers. We also believe that as governance volunteers become aware of the importance practicing proper and thorough volunteer resource management, the experience of those volunteers and of the holistic nonprofit organization will be improved.

While *The International Journal of Volunteer Administration* style guidelines encourage usage of the contemporary terms "volunteer resource manager" and "volunteer resource management", the authors use the terms "volunteer administrator" and "volunteer administration" interchangeably with "volunteer resource manager" and "volunteer resource management," respectively, in this article. "Volunteer administrator" and "volunteer administration" refer to professional activity in keeping with the guidelines of the Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration (CCVA, 2009).

## **Volunteer Resource Management and the Board**

A review of the literature demonstrated that the link between volunteer resource management practices and boards of directors is very tenuous. Much of the literature describes the centrality of the board in the operations of a nonprofit organization. The literature also discerns areas in which governance experiences of volunteers may become counter-productive. It is because of the centrality of the board, and because of the potential for weaknesses to develop unnecessarily, that volunteer resource management practice needs to extend into the governance arena.

Kikulis (2000) observed that the "volunteer board is a deep structure and a core practice" of an organization that "becomes taken for granted as appropriate and legitimate . . . providing a source of stability and resistance to change" (p. 308). In the case of national sports organizations, a "performance crisis" resulted in the erosion of volunteer control (i.e., the deinstitutionalization of volunteer control at the board level (Kikulis, p. 310). In the case of the sports organizations accountability increased along with a focus on compensated senior management, the appreciation of the board as volunteers diminished.

Ranson, Arnott, McKeown, Martin, and Smith (2005) examined the participation of volunteers in school governance. Specifically, they asked whether volunteers "enhanced democratic participation and public accountability" (p. 358). Their findings indicated that volunteers in governance roles built infrastructures leading to institutional practice, improved institutional leadership, and improved scholastic achievement by building "social and cultural conditions of learning" (p. 366). This affirms the central

importance of board performance to organizational health. However, the study also found that "school governance in many respects remains significantly unrepresentative of some of its significant parent constituencies. As such, citizen participation in school governance has yet to be realized in many communities" (p. 357).

The authors recognize the opportunity that volunteer administration has to make deeper and richer impacts on the process of governance. To illuminate this idea, it is worth taking a closer look at the experience of governors (i.e., board members) of arts organizations.

### **The Approach to the Research**

A governance research project began in 2006 undertaken by the Institute of Nonprofit Studies at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The project explores, in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), how governance volunteers can realize greater community impact through their work. The research being reported on in this paper comes from a peer learning circle (McGill & Beaty, 1993; Suda, 2001; Wade & Hammick, 1999) comprised of volunteer board members from arts and culture organizations with offices in Calgary. Using an intensive and facilitated process, a peer learning circle of governance volunteers was convened to explore dimensions of governance in light of the complex context within which governance of nonprofit organizations takes place. Burnard (1987) observed that while adults may accumulate a considerable amount of knowledge, they may not have had any direct experience of situations about which they might have knowledge of. This difference between "knowing of" and "knowing that" is the gap that can be traversed in peer learning circles.

Participants in peer learning circles report high degrees of change to their behaviors and decision-making processes because of the impact of discussions and reflections they have had with one another during the circles (O'Donnell & King, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Research on peer learning (O'Donnell & King) demonstrated that the interaction between members of a learning circle influences the cognitive activity and, subsequently, the learning that is occurring. A learning circle helps "people to take an active stance towards life and helps overcome the tendency to be passive towards the pressures of life and work" (McGill & Beaty, 1993, p. 11). The authors served as facilitators to the peer learning circle, encouraging group members to explore, ask questions, critique their perceptions in the light of group input and thereby draw out the meaning within their own experiences (Burnard, 1987).

The participants invited to the project were contacted from a list compiled through social and professional networks in the arts community in Calgary. Criteria for participation were that (1) the governors identify that they have a governance board and (2) the organization's mission is focused on arts. There were four participants in the peer learning circle. Three remained active throughout the process and two completed all of the reflection activities. Six meetings, each 1.5 hours long, were hosted from February through April, 2008. Six dimensions of governance focused the conversations: educational, strategic, analytical, interpersonal, political, and contextual (Chait, Holland, & Taylor, 1996). Issues related to volunteer resource management such as recruitment, training, and orientation emerged through the peer learning circle process.

## Emergent Results

During the peer learning circle meetings, volunteer governors (i.e., board members) of arts organizations described challenges and difficulties in understanding their role as governors. Specifically, they raised issues that can be categorized as involving: identity, authenticity, roles, and legacy. The indicators of the challenges are presented along with the theoretical categories in Figure 1.

While these theoretical categories and observations inform governance practices, they also speak to the issue of volunteer resource management at the board level. The discussion that follows explores each of the theoretical categories in some detail. Implications for volunteer resource managers working with volunteers coming to the board of directors are also highlighted. This also includes referring to the Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration's recently released *Body of Knowledge of Volunteer Administration* (CCVA, 2009).

### *Identity*

Participant comments regarding identity included: "Feeling heard and valued is different from everyone agreeing on a decision."; "How to ensure everyone is heard?"; "My board should discuss norms and culture."; "It is possible to educate governors to be good governors, it is not possible to expect good governance."; and, "I lack the trust and faith to think that if I give you the information you can take it and run with it." These comments suggest that transitioning from being an artist or supporter of the arts as a member of the community, to serving in an official role on a board of directors, poses some challenges in terms of reshaping a board member's identity. Identity is derived when individuals can create meaningfulness out

of their perception of the world and their relationship with it (Demerath, 2006).

Peer learning circle participants referring to challenges in adjusting to the norms, culture, and training of the board are signalling that orientation and training of board members, as volunteers, still requires attention. It appears that the assumption most usually made by the boards was that the responsibilities of orientation and training were to be taken care of by the board itself. However, the boards represented by the peer learning circle participants were not effective in providing these sufficiently. This may be due to a lack of knowledge or experience in conducting an effective volunteer orientation or identifying and then addressing training needs.

### *Authenticity*

Participant comments regarding authenticity were: "I feel left out- we're doing something not right."; "Be prepared to problem solve with people who may not see your point of view."; "Each has own definition of what art is – how do you get over the prejudice?"; "Whoever has stronger will, will make things happen."; and, "Placing procedures over people is not a considerate way of treating people."

Participants expressed feelings of emotional and cognitive conflict experienced in the governance process. These feelings may have arisen from perceptions that their decision-making did not reflect their artistic selves or their sense of themselves as governors, or fulfill their sense of how an arts organization contributes to community. Each of these points of conflict is related to the notion of authenticity. Within person-centered psychology, authenticity is a notion that connects three parts: (1) a person's primary experience, (2) their symbolized awareness, and (3) their outward behavior and

Figure 1. Theoretical categories of being a governor in an arts or arts-serving nonprofit organization and related peer learning circle observations.

Core Theoretical Category	Observations from the Peer Learning Circle
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The governors hold a “creative lens” while viewing their roles.</li> <li>• The creative lens contributes and focuses organizational culture that then frames how board, staff and other volunteers see themselves.</li> <li>• Arts organizations and the board see themselves as working with audiences not clients.</li> <li>• Board members see themselves as an audience for the work of the organization.</li> <li>• Board members view a primary purpose to be the advancement of arts and culture within a social context.</li> <li>• Identity as an artist or supporter/advocate of the arts takes precedence over identity as a governor.</li> </ul>
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authenticity comes through transactional leadership rather than emotional leadership.</li> <li>• Applying respectful, considerate approach to reach an outcome is emphasized over the outcome itself.</li> <li>• Social connection and trust build cohesion – and cohesion is perceived as necessary for respectful discourse.</li> <li>• The board uses individual and collective power to influence the behaviour and perceptions of others.</li> <li>• The board places a high value on permission to act and adherence to rules that respect the ways in which the organization carries out its business (e.g., policies, bylaws, documentation)</li> </ul>
Role Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boards lack of clarity in the governance role, for example, as a governor am I an artist, do I represent ‘art’, or do I represent interests of artists?</li> <li>• There are multiple and sometimes conflicting roles of governors, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Governor as volunteer</li> <li>○ Governor as audience</li> <li>○ Governor as functionary</li> <li>○ Governor as social advocate</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What portion of the governance process does each governor own?</li> </ul>
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The board questions the community leadership of the organization and the outcomes that are to be generated.</li> <li>• The board operates within a partial understanding of the organization's past, present, future.</li> <li>• Looking into the future, the board faces the question of the role of art in society.</li> </ul>

communication (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliouis, & Joseph, 2008). The literature on authenticity has recognized that a person's perception of an experience is different from the actual experience.

Within the profession of volunteer administration many of these issues are addressed. Specifically, a volunteer resource manager is knowledgeable about strategic alignment of volunteer activity; strategies for internal collaboration; problem-solving tools and techniques; volunteer roles (e.g., types, design elements, development process, etc.); volunteer orientation (e.g., design principles, strategies and tools, etc.); training volunteers (e.g., design principles, strategies and tools, etc.); and principles of conflict management (CCVA, 2009). Individually and holistically, these skills would be of great assistance to a board where volunteer members are trying to reconcile their previous board and organizational experiences with the particular and specific work of the arts organization. The situation of the board believing that it alone can resolve issues raised by board members leaves volunteer board members in a disadvantaged position. It also raises the need for broader relationship building inside the organization. Consultation with the organization's volunteer administrator would bring important and helpful skills to the table.

#### *Role Identification*

Participant comments regarding role identification included: "Asking what we've been able to do with what we've done, what we've been missing, how much we can lobby for."; "We can do our own self reflection – not necessarily as a group."; and, "How to do good board work is removed from day to day operations and

purpose of the organization so may lead to loss of motivation."

Volunteer administrators recognize that creating a good match between the individual volunteer and their role within the organization is critical if the needs of the organization and of the volunteer are to be satisfied. The newly released *Body of Knowledge for Volunteer Administration* (CCVA, 2009) includes two relevant categories: (1) "Volunteer Staffing" including: volunteer roles (types, design elements, and development process); marketing principles and strategies (internal and external); volunteer engagement (recruitment trends, approaches, and messaging); volunteer placement (interview techniques, screening principles and techniques, assignment tools); volunteer orientation (design principles, strategies and tools); and, training volunteers (design principles, strategies and tools); and (2) "Support for Volunteers" including: supervision (principles, strategies and tools); principles and procedures for corrective action/dismissal; principles of conflict management; team building principles and strategies; and, recognition and acknowledgement (principles and strategies).

The content addressed within these areas of the *Body of Knowledge* identifies competencies for volunteer administrators to ensure that volunteer board members are appropriately screened. This helps to ensure that the board members are suited to the organization; have clarity about their roles on the board and within the organization; receive training to improve their effectiveness in their role; and, work as a team. Board members in the peer learning circle, however, did not report having experienced anything like the support provided to other volunteers under the direct responsibility of a volunteer administrator. This particular theoretical

category also provides important information for volunteer administrators who have an opportunity to work with volunteers on the board of directors.

Governors of arts organizations placed dramatically more importance (as indicated by the frequency with which it was raised and the amount of time spent discussing it) on relationships and their own sense of identity as a board member when compared to the results from other peer learning circles focused on other kinds of nonprofit organizations. The literature in governance and psychology demonstrates that governors have identities framed around social relationships. As cited in Brewer and Gardner (1996, p. 83), Breckler and Greenwald have identified that “individuals seek to define themselves in terms of their immersion in relationships with others and with larger collectives and derive much of their self-evaluation from such social identities.” According to Demerath (2006), “the quantity and quality of the relationships one has with others positively influences the significance of whatever role, status, or identity those relationships are dependent upon” (p. 499).

For volunteer board members in arts organizations, the quantity (which includes frequency and sheer volume of) and quality of relationships are essential to the role of being a governor. The relationships are many: between board members; between board members and organizational administrators; between board members the broader artistic community; and, between board members and individual artists. Weaknesses in any of these relationships could diminish the identity and the effectiveness of volunteers in governance roles.

Governors in the peer learning circle identified challenges in overcoming or setting aside their sense of self and their needs as the “audience” that the arts

organization serves while they govern. Some governors in arts organizations are themselves artists. Others are individuals who appreciate the role of art in society.

Stability plays an important role in creating meaning. Stability means that governance is a readily identifiable activity and the outcomes of the activity are tangible and focused. Seemingly counter-intuitive, another way that stability and commitment can be generated is to increase the exposure of members to multiple roles within an organization (Demerath, 2006). To realize what it means to be a volunteer board member in an arts organization, board members may want to give serious consideration to facilitating and enabling governance volunteers to explore multiple identities while governing. Volunteer resource managers working with governance volunteers in arts organizations need to pay special attention to how the identity of those volunteers is created and sustained.

### *Legacy*

Participant comments regarding legacy included: “When things are going well, communicating with stakeholders on roles takes a back seat.”; “Constituents are likely to identify where the problems may reside.”; “Arts education – is it still part of what we are doing?”; and, “Not wanting to participate anymore when decision making doesn’t meet expectations.”

The theme of loss was not one that was expected to surface in the peer learning circle with governors from arts organizations. For context, the notion of the sense of loss emerged pervasively during the peer learning circle process hosted with governors of Christian faith-based organizations (Angelini & Seel, 2007). What is constructive to understand about this similarity of governance experience across two extremely different

nonprofit subsectors, faith and art, is that meaning-building guides an individual's frame of the future (Demerath, 2006).

Meaning helps an individual makes sense of the past. Meaning determines how an individual responds to certain events or objects in the present. Demerath maintained that for something to have meaning, there are three variables derived from information theory and research on memory and attitudes: frequency, stability, and impact. In the context of governance, frequency would be related to how often a governor perceives something unique about a situation and that this perception helped the governor understand the world around him or herself. The impact of frequency would be fully realized when the governor was able to articulate an experience. Stability would be achieved when governors could clearly articulate the nature and scope of their role on the board. Impact is achieved when a particular meaning is surfaced and then connected to help governors understand other things in the world around them or help them understand other things about themselves. Proper orientation about their governance role, training along the way and other dimensions of volunteer engagement familiar to volunteer administrators such as team building could positively contribute to each of these variables and strengthen the governance experience in the organization. When governors are exploring an issue and are able to take a step back from the issue to discuss the values, philosophy or ideology of their thinking, and then apply that philosophy, ideology, or set of values to another set of governance concerns, we would see impact coming to life.

### **Conclusion**

The impetus for the arts peer learning circle was to explore whether the way governors (i.e., board members) of arts

organizations go about making sense of what it means to be a governor is similar to, or different from, the experience of governors in other nonprofit subsectors. Differences in the experiences of governors across subsectors are evident in the emergent theoretical categories derived in from each peer learning circle project. The experience, however, of determining what it means to be a governor is similar for all governors in one way: the need, as governor, to communicate authentically and to build relationships that serve authenticity such that governors affirm their identities. How governors come to know their authentic selves will likely require a different process in the various subsectors, but, for the sake of effective governance, identity-building cannot be ignored. Volunteer resource management can and should play a larger role in cultivating and strengthening the identity of governors.

It is evident that volunteer resource management could offer a great deal of knowledge and experience that could improve the functioning of boards of directors. It may be that boards of directors and individual governors are not aware of the close relationship between how the board operates and volunteer resource management practices. Two points can be made from this research. First, boards of directors and governors themselves would benefit from the experience of volunteer resource managers. To that end, boards of directors should begin to establish ties – through policy and procedures – to the volunteer administrator in their organization. Second, volunteer administrators need to make direct connections between the principles of effective volunteer resource management and board governance. Instead of treating board members as a class of volunteers apart from the other volunteers associated with the organization, volunteer



administrators should make every attempt to demonstrate how the basic aspects of a volunteer program and also basic elements of an effective board.

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