

Article

Towards a new definition of charity: getting your board on board

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Definitions of charity

Caroline McCormick explores definitions of charity and gives her top tips to help boards see arts and culture as a worthy cause

Charity: *An organisation set up to provide help and raise money for those in need.*

The body of organisations viewed collectively as the object of fundraising or donations.

The voluntary giving of help, typically in the form of money, to those in need.

When you read the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of 'charity' it's not hard to understand why few in the UK perceive the arts in such a way. The concept of 'need' can be a particular barrier; it denotes things essential to survival such as food and water, healthcare and education.

The perception of whether the arts and culture are essential is partly related to the period of history we are living in. The ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans certainly placed a high value on culture.

In today's world cultural value is too often commodified and perceived as a luxury rather than an essential part of a world we want to live in. Culture is often only appreciated in retrospect or when a nation is under pressure.

When Putin allegedly dismissed Britain as 'a small island nobody listens to', David Cameron responded with the retort:

'Britain is an island that helped to abolish slavery, that has invented most of the things worthwhile inventing - including every sport currently played around the world - that still today is responsible

for art, literature and music that delights the entire world'.

Apparently Putin subsequently denied ever making the remark.

World leaders aside, boards of arts organisations commonly struggle with the idea of the organisation as a charity. This can have wide-ranging implications, including a reluctance to engage in fundraising and to lead the way by making a gift themselves.

The definition of a charitable body is more helpful in addressing these issues.

Charitable body: *an organisation that is recognised in the law as having exclusively charitable purposes. It must not be run for profit, and any income it receives must be spent on helping it to achieve its charitable purposes.*

The definition also opens up the need for Trustees to understand their role and legal responsibilities. These have evolved considerably in recent years and I would say far less than half the boards I encounter really do understand the responsibilities they have signed up to.

There is an undoubted need for an enhanced approach to the recruitment, appointment and induction of Trustees across the cultural sector.

If this sounds remarkably like the board of a charity you're working with, what can you do about it?

Getting your board on board

Saying that we're a charity and that we'd like everyone to make a gift won't be the solution. If the culture of an organisation is in denial of its identity then a more involved process will be required.

Like all strategies, the approach must suit the personality and style of the organisation but these are a few steps I would recommend considering:

Staff should lead the way

Working through how the staff feel about the organisation and the difference it makes to people's lives is an essential process.

Giving people time and space to understand and adopt that narrative can revitalise an organisation that has lost its sense of purpose and redefine one that is already focused. As well as reinvigorating the organisation, this process will create an atmosphere and culture for the board to respond to.

At the Natural History Museum the board made gifts after every member of the fundraising team made a pledge to do so.

Give the board time

Understanding what it means to be part of a charity board isn't just about fundraising. A workshop or several dedicated sections of board meetings are usually required to explore the legal responsibilities of being a trustee, including the fundraising needs of the organisation.

Giving the board time and space to ask questions and explore ideas is essential to enable them to develop their understanding of the organisation.

Understand what kind of charity you are

Charities address problems; that is their fundamental role. It's important that the board understands the contribution the organisation is making to society, who the beneficiaries are and the difference the work is making.

Don't be afraid to shout about your success as an organisation. This process will help the board develop a framework for decision-making about the direction of the charity and also to consider why they personally find meaning in it.

Fundraising is the outcome of a process

These conversations should naturally lead to a discussion about board giving. Establish why people are already giving time and energy to the board before moving to the question of giving. Trustees should give in lots of ways - money is just one of them - and gifts should be proportionate.

Celebrate success

Publicly celebrating support from the staff and board is good for morale and can create a domino effect.

Set the path for the future

It's important to recognise that the chances are you won't convince everyone on the first time of asking. Celebrating success and retaining a commitment to board giving as part of any future recruitment, ideally written into board job descriptions, is essential to enabling a change of culture over time.

