

Get the most from your trustees

Rick Bond looks at how to improve your relationship with your board

If you work for an organisation that's registered as a company, has charitable status (or both), then you'll have a board of trustees that plays a greater or lesser part in influencing your work.

Of the hallmarks of a successful arts organisation, having a healthy relationship between trustees and managers is the most important. This is based on a mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's roles and responsibilities.

Let me explain the position of a trustee. They are certainly not there simply to rubber-stamp the decisions of the artistic director and the management team. First, the trustees are your employers. They are your ultimate bosses. Even the artistic director or chief executive is responsible to them. Trustees are entrusted with the safekeeping of the company. They are required by law to ensure it complies with all legal requirements. They must ensure it operates as a going concern (i.e. not cease profitable programmes simply because a programmer is excited by something altogether more challenging). They must also ensure the company has realistic plans for its development.

And if they don't?

Well, they are personally liable for the company's debts should it fail.

OK, liabilities might be limited by their 'guarantee', but if they are found to have been at fault (and ignorance through lack of diligence counts), then liability protection can be waived. That's why trustees are correct to insist on procedures, reports, etc. It's also worth knowing that trustees remain responsible for any decision made by the board for the remainder of their lives – even after they have stepped down or disagreed with it. No wonder then that they can occasionally come across as difficult and demanding.

So what does this mean to you? Well, trustees are not necessarily there to do the job – that's why they employ experts (and you're one of them). But they must know that it is being done properly. They have to be diligent and convinced that you have done your homework and have in place the correct systems to do your job properly. So, here are a couple of things you can do to create a good relationship:

1. When making plans, identify potential trustee needs or concerns, revise your plans and then submit them to get a decision in one meeting, not two – they'll also appreciate the time saved. Is there a board member with whom you can informally discuss plans prior to formally proposing them? If you

can, ascertain the essential pieces of information they need to have when making a decision, so that you can include them. Finally, ensure the board receives the information they need in good time – not a report tabled on the day.

2. Nurture trustee confidence in you and the work of your department. Do trustees understand what you do and how you make decisions? Effective boards often factor in a presentation or Q&A sessions with a marketing officer once or twice a year. This allows you to explain current practices and the reason for them. It's a session where they are allowed to ask intelligently naïve questions without embarrassment – which they'll appreciate. It also allows you an opportunity to discuss how trustees could help you (er ... try not to suggest backing off – when you have earned the right to do this, you'll find they already are). Some trustees and management teams find it helpful to agree a mutual promise, in which both parties agree to do things that will help the other party do their job.

If you would like an example then I'd be happy to e-mail you one – just ask. Good luck! ■

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Rick Bond
Director
The Complete Works
(UK) Ltd

e rick@thecompleteworks.org.uk