

The time has come to give governance the attention it deserves, argues **David Kershaw**.

Partners in crime



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“Why can't we just report straight to our funders? Why do I even need a board?” asked one of the delegates at last month's one-day conference on governance in the arts, organised by the Cultural Leadership Programme. If one needed any evidence that governance was an urgent issue for our sector to tackle, then this was it. The event, chaired by Baroness Genista McIntosh, provided nearly one hundred Chief Executives and Chairs from across the visual and performing arts, heritage, museums and galleries, with the space and time for an honest and frank exchange about how the crucial relationship between boards and executives, the lynchpin that can make or break an organisation, can work better. But what does governance in the cultural sector mean?

Striking a balance

My personal starting point is from a corporate perspective. Most of my life has been spent in the commercial world, and though the fundamentals of corporate boards are not that different to arts boards there is one key difference: risk. The greatest challenge to a cultural board is how to balance the accounts and the risk-taking that are so vital to successful artistic projects. It would be a hideous trap if boards were to start saying 'because of financial risk I can't take creative risk'. If we are going to continue to have a successful creative economy, which both enriches our lives and contributes to the wealth of the UK, we absolutely have to have great leadership for it. Great leadership in this sector means taking risks. So trust and a

shared vision between the Chairman and Chief Executive of a cultural organisation are crucial. One of the most interesting sessions of the day was from the Chairman and Chief Executive of two very different cultural organisations about how the 'leadership axis' works for them. Michael Day, Chief Executive of Historic Royal Palaces, felt strongly that, to be effective, a Board and Chairman must strike the right balance between policing and cheerleading the executive. They must have an appetite for risk and change, knowledge of the sector and a willingness to engage in advocacy and fundraising. Charles Mackay, his Chairman, said that on the other side of the partnership it was important that the executive makes full use of the expertise on its board and gives it plenty of opportunity to be involved in the life of the organisation. These may sound like obvious points, but discussions at the conference showed they were certainly not true of most organisations.

New directions

A very different but equally harmonious pairing was John McGrath and Wylie Longmore, former Chief Executive and Chairman of Contact, the pioneering theatre space in Manchester. McGrath, now Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Wales, summed up the issue when he said that, for him, a chairman should be a "partner in crime" – someone he could take risks and share a vision with. A sort of Thelma and Louise of the cultural world jumping off a cliff together into the artistic unknown. The current make-up of boards was also much discussed. Roy Clare, Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, spoke on the 'Today' programme on the morning of the conference about the

overwhelmingly "male, pale and stale" boards of our museums and galleries, and how this means that collections are not being used to tell new stories and appeal to wider audiences. There was strong agreement at the event that more young people, women and people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds need to be recruited as trustees, and there was much debate about how this should be done.

Training for existing board members emerged as one of the most pressing needs – there is absolutely no point recruiting trustees from different backgrounds with new perspectives if the structure, ethos and the very language used by the board will alienate and exclude. If a new member is recruited to make a board more representative – whether in terms of age, gender or ethnicity – there is also the temptation to pigeon-hole rather than to let that person be him- or herself. Anyone joining the board of a cultural

organisation needs to consider their motivation carefully. Too often it is about reflected glory – on both sides. This is especially true of the recruitment of arts trustees from the business world. The time has come for the cultural sector to engage with governance as an issue. Good governance supports rather than hinders the creative process, helps organisations through troubled economic times, and can combine expertise and wisdom with fresh perspectives. ■

David Kershaw is CEO of M&C Saatchi and Chairman of the Cultural Leadership Programme, a Government-funded initiative to promote more effective and diverse leadership in the cultural sector and creative industries. It runs work placements, courses and development days, and produces research on how leadership in the sector can be improved and diversified.
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