

EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS NETWORK

Sharing Resources: Expertise-To-Go

Thursday September 24, 2015

Wilton Historical Society

NOTES

Although we understand that for major projects, EDs need to turn to consultants for analysis and strategy forward, and that for professional development meetings there will always be a place to invite outside experts to speak with our group, we want, in this FY16 EDN series, to identify, surface, and put to use the expertise in our own ranks.

Before you call in the consultant, who else can you, as an ED, turn to for advice, perspective, suggestions, tips and recommendations? We launched our new series with a panel of our EDN Steering Committee giving very brief thumbnail sketches of the key elements of their expertise and how they came about acquiring it. The point was quite clearly not to be covering the waterfront but to give examples of the kind of expertise that these EDs could offer - and to elect from those attending (and from those not able to) a declaration of their own areas of expertise so that we could put together a roster of experts that other EDs (and key board members of organizations without EDs) could consult in times of need. To that end we opened the series with four EDs who constitute our steering committee: **Lou Ursone**, *Curtain Call*; **Heather Marie-Montilla**, *Pequot Library*; **Bonnie Wattles**, *Franklin Street Works*; and **Amy Allen**, *Darien Art Center*.

Lou Ursone spoke to his experience with **Marketing and Media Relations**. Although Lou has been in theatre all his life, he has a degree in journalism. His key pieces of advice included:

1. **Find the unique angle** that will really get news outlets interested in your story
2. **Read** and get to *know* the arts and culture writers at your local newspapers and online outlets, so that you can tailor pieces for them.
3. Lead times have changed: think at **least one month in advance** before you send materials.
4. Prepare **concise** stories: all the information you can send in clear, concise form; in fact, if you write them as a feature story for them, there's a greater chance it will get published.
5. **Pitch** your stories.
6. New technology: find the balance between too much and not enough.
7. Direct mail does in fact still work - certainly in theatre.
8. Radio - select stations that appeal to the show; Cablevision can be effective.

Heather Marie-Montilla spoke on her experience in **Strategic Planning**. In nonprofits for 15 years (museums, arts education, dance, community building), while at Doing Art Together she worked on the DeVos Strategic Planning and Implementation Program which included masterclasses on strategic planning with Michael Kaiser and Brett Egen from the Kennedy Center. Some of her lessons:

1. **Using outside consultants** in developing a strategic plan is key: you need the perspective and they will be your right-hand support
2. Be aware that a strategic plan has to be **a responsive, changing document**
3. **Staff and board commitment** is crucial to implementing the plan
4. But you first have to have commitment from the Board to have **read and understand the Plan**.
5. Have a board retreat as you launch the Plan and then have frequent check-ins.
6. Invite others with expertise with developing and implementing strategic plans to share what they know.

Bonnie Wattles, who knows both sides of the board - serving as board president, and as ED working to *build* a board, spoke on her experience with **Board Development**. The primary goal is to **create a leadership team**, committed to the organization's mission and fully engaged (financially, through fundraising and bringing people to the organization).

1. Building the board is a skill: **filling well-defined positions** with people who will be responsible for the next 3-5 years of the organization (too often it's a haphazard process).
2. Recruiting new board members is a year-long process that the whole board should share.
3. The "**board matrix**" (see resources at BoardSource) with its list of key functions to be filled, is one key instrument - however, Bonnie believes in also having a **set of criteria**, such as:
 - a) *Must-have*: people who could commit to carry out the mission, and be characterized as: *cooperative, works well in groups, has useful contacts in community.*
 - b) *Nice-to-have*: for example strong fundraising ability.
4. For **board-engagement** (in fundraising and attending events, etc.), **include the board in the idea-generation and problem-solving process**. (A recent exercise divided a board into groups to a) brainstorm three things they could do and share with the group, b) writing down 3 things needed from the organization to complete the task.)

Amy Allen, speaking on **Board Education**, noted that after a few years as ED for the Darien Art Center she noticed the board had become less and less engaged: too much sitting and listening at meetings and not enough doing.

1. **Nominating Committee should be a standing year-long committee**, critical in educating the board.
2. **A Board Handbook**, delineating the organizations events with timeline, financials, policies/bylaws and board members' responsibilities is key (Amy shared the DAC Handbook to illustrate this including a handout from the The Music Theatre of Connecticut an excellent example of board responsibilities all members need to sign-off on.)
3. Having a **Board Award** to toast exceptional service always gives a boost (and other board members pause to consider their own contributions).
4. Recommended **assigning board members to problems** that need solving.
5. Also connect new board members to outstanding, longstanding board members in a **buddy system** that can create true partnerships.
6. At the first board meeting of the year, **go through the handbook, page by page** (recognizing that people don't read what they should).

7. Establish a **job description** for every staff member, committee chair and committee members - every board member should take on one committee project a year.
8. Choosing a goal for the year, for the board to achieve, helps to unite people.
9. Each board member should sit down once a year with the ED and board chair to **review each member's commitment** (signup sheets do not work!).
10. Invite board members to events casually, so it doesn't feel like a big thing (establish a more relaxed relationship: "drop in and bring a tomato from your garden.")
11. Send photos of board members with press releases. Friends will see them involved and start a conversation with the board member. **Share impact stories and build a bank of them.**
12. Have a personal self-analysis: analyze their participation: board can review and decide whether the board member needs to take a year off.

In questions and comments, one ED said she shared stories of the impact of the organization on the community each week with her board - it gives them a bank of stories to share with others.

Cindy Armijo (Westport Arts Center) asked about using an external moderator at her next board retreat - a suggestion that was endorsed by everyone. Two names that came up: Robert Campbell (a CT-based consultant) and Deborah Hertz from the William Pitt Foundation. The Peer Advisor Network was also recommended as a source for such expertise.

In responding to a question on techniques for developing a more diverse board, Bonnie recommended asking questions such as "Who can I get who can get things done in the city?" "Which younger people who know our organization could help with audience-building and social media skills?" Heather advised that if you were bringing younger people onto a board of much older people, then bring them in as a class, rather than individually.

Susan Gold (Westport Historical) emphasized the importance in her experience of having a strategic document that was flexible and responsive to change. Heather responded that she uses a Management Plan for internal implementation of the strategic plan. She emphasized the importance of structure and of not veering off course, but at the same time having that degree of flexibility that can address new situations, informed by the core assertions of the plan.

Maisa Tisdale asked about expertise to get the story of her unique institution out - how to establish a long-term marketing strategy. Amy recommended partnering with an organization that has a similar mission. The State's Peer Advisor Network was again recommended, as was the Taproot Foundation - "connecting nonprofits with skilled volunteers who share their expertise pro bono".

Next Meeting: Wednesday, December 16, 2015. Darien Public Library