



# TCG

THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

## CENTERPIECE

### FOCUS ON: GOVERNANCE

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## DIVERSIFYING OUR BOARDS

BY JAAN WHITEHEAD

One of the most difficult challenges facing trustees is the challenge of diversifying our boards. When we look at our theatres, we find much more diversity on our stages than in our staffs and much more diversity in our staffs than on our boards. The picture seems out of balance.

Trustees have been talking about diversify for a long time now, but the conversation often seems to come to a dead end, lacking clarity of purpose or reflecting uncertainty about how to proceed. Meetings on the subject often lead more to frustration than accomplishment. The questions still remain. What does diversity mean? Why should it be undertaken? How can it be achieved? What can I do about it?

In this issue of the *Centerpiece*, we are reprinting *Directing Diversity*, an article that Gwen Cochran Hadden originally wrote for the American Symphony Orchestra League and has updated for our *Centerpiece*. Gwen is one of the most experienced and thoughtful people in the field of diversity, and she has done considerable work over the years with TCG. Anyone who has had the privilege of being in one of her workshops or talking with her about these issues not only recognizes her expertise and wisdom but comes away with a renewed sense of possibility. In her article, she talks about what kind of preparation trustees needs to undergo if they genuinely want to diversify their board, the steps trustees can take to make diversification happen and the pitfalls that need to be recognized and overcome if a diversified board is to function in an effective and healthy way. She also talks about the very difficult subject of change — why it frightens us and how we can deal with it. We are very pleased to be able to share her thinking with you.

On another subject, I urge trustees to read TCG's *Theatre Facts 1999*, by Zannie Giraud Voss and Glenn B. Voss. The publication can be obtained as a free copy from the TCG website, [www.tcg.org](http://www.tcg.org), through TCG's customer service for \$5.00 (212) 697-5230 or from your managing leader. This is a report that TCG does every spring analyzing the results of their annual survey of the practices and performance of nonprofit theatres. The survey includes over 300 theatres and shows comparative information on income, expenditures, financial status, audiences and many other characteristics of these theatres. For example, did you know that the nonprofit theatre industry contributed \$700 million dollars to the economy in 1999 (and that was just from the over 300 theatres surveyed out of an approximate 1,200 nonprofit professional theatres nationwide)? Or that almost 18 million attended our performances? Do you know the average breakdown between earned and contributed income for theatres of different sizes? Or how much endowments contribute to budgets? The report is a fascinating way to see how we are doing as a field, how our own theatres fit into that picture and what accomplishments and problems face us. It is a short report, well-written, and offers the kind of financial and analytical information trustees often look for.

Governance *Centerpiece* Curator: Jaan Whitehead, Trustee, Living Stage.

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# DIRECTING DIVERSITY

BY GWEN COCHRAN HADDEN

Everyone has read or heard about the changes in the demographics of this country. Indeed, anyone who has recently bought groceries, had the car serviced, or stayed in a hotel has witnessed these changes first hand. It is estimated that by the year 2050, one in three Americans will be Black, Hispanic, or Asian. The disabled population is currently the largest minority, with more than 45 million people in this category. Census estimates predict that within one year, the population of the state of California will be made up of more than 50% people of color and whites will be in the minority. Spending power of the minority population of this country equals the gross national product of Canada, and minority markets buy more than any U.S. trading partner. A diverse population is here to stay, and that diversity creates new partners in every facet of American life. These partnerships include the performing arts, where opportunities for participation exist throughout the field. Theatres are beginning to reflect the diversity of their communities among their actors, managers, staff, volunteers, and boards of trustees.

To prepare effectively for broadened board representation, theatres can take three important steps. The first step is to facilitate a discussion with the full board on questions of diversity:

- Why are we interested in broadening our membership? Do we seek people who will fit into the board as it is now, or are we willing to allow the culture to change as new people become involved?
- How will becoming more diverse fit into our mission? Do we have to change our mission to become more diverse? Do we *want* to change our mission? Can the inclusion of people from “minority” populations enhance the mission of the organization and the board?
- What do we mean when say we want to broaden our membership? What groups are we reaching out to include? At what level of involvement do we want new members to serve? Are we willing to permit differences of opinion to be voiced on this board?
- Whom do we need to support this effort? How can we encourage staff support? Who will implement the effort?
- What is our plan and our time frame?

- What do we have to offer people of diverse backgrounds that will make them want to belong to our board?

Essential to the success of this effort is having support from every board member. Facilitating a full board discussion on this topic using the above questions will ensure that each board member knows of the effort, understands the preliminary extent of the endeavor, understands the reasons for such an effort, and is aware of his or her role in supporting it. Answers to the questions will indicate to leadership how prepared the board is to participate in such an effort, what needs to be done to make board members receptive to new members, and how the new members should be prepared for participation on the board.

The second step is to analyze and identify the cultures of the organization and the board. This will indicate what the profile of new board members must be in order for them to be successful in the organization. For example, bringing in board members who are more liberal and aggressive in their thinking – more interested in immediate institutional change – than the existing board may result in conflict or frustration on the part of both groups. Or, if the board includes a strong informal structure where the elected leaders are not really the power of the board, then the newly elected members may be ineffectual unless they are told of this formal and informal structure and how they can be a part of it.

The third step in preparing for diversification is to re-examine the responsibilities and criteria for board members. Many organizations, including theatres, require that board members be subscribers and donate to (or solicit contributions for) the organization at a specific level each year. These practices do not have to be impediments to broadening the membership of the board. For many people, however, it is important to become a full and accepted member of a new board before being required to donate or solicit contributions. Expanding the roles and responsibilities of all members can be an effective practice in recruiting new members for boards of trustees especially when the effort is being made to become more inclusive and reflective of the greater community. The board should create a menu of ways that members can be effective and indicate what the minimum acceptable level may be. For example, if a board member feels that he or she cannot subscribe on a yearly basis, perhaps attendance at a minimum number of performances can be substituted. If a prospective member cannot donate at the specific level indicated, he or she may be asked to contribute active volunteer work

instead. The board's menu of tasks should be shared with the new member to see if the responsibilities are compatible with his or her ability and commitment to serve on the board.

Once the decision has been made to diversify the board, the nominating committee should determine the board's needs for the terms that are available, and then plan for the nominations. Prospective nominees with diverse backgrounds are not limited in their skills to those areas that are related to diversity; like others on the board, these people may be selected because of their access to a variety of community groups or foundations, or because they have an area of expertise that is needed in the organization.

Once names have been introduced into the nomination process, the prospective candidate should be told all about the organization and about the responsibilities, roles, and expectations of a board member. It is important at this point to consider what our assumptions are about the value of board membership and to prepare ourselves for other perceptions of the meaning of board participation. Just because we value board membership does not mean that everyone does. Those of us who serve on boards may not be in touch with the manner in which our organization is viewed in the wider community. Be open to questions about the benefits of serving on this board, about the ways in which the organization relates to minority communities, and about the composition of the board, the staff, and the theatre itself. Recruiting board members may be the first selling job on the road to increasing the diversity of the organization.

When boards are beginning efforts to become more diverse, they often look for the most highly visible community leaders. This can work well if a very active community leader can commit time to the board, or is willing to make financial contributions instead. But it can also result in a negative experience if this new board member is unable to commit either time or resources, or has no real interest in supporting the art of the theatre.

One of the most realistic places to look for new board members is right under the organization's nose: in the audience. Have staff inform the board about people of minority populations who regularly attend performances, and check their seats against the subscribers list. You know from their attendance that they care about theatre. Seek out people who may not possess a high public profile but who have demonstrated some interest in plays. Commitment to the art form and availability and willingness to serve are more important to the life of the theatre than a high profile.

Once they have been invited to sit on the board, have received information about the organization and the afford exposure to a broader community may result in identifying and attracting new candidates for the board.

expectations of board members, and have agreed to serve for a specific period, new members should be made to feel welcome and truly included in the board's activities. Orientation sessions should include an explanation of the meeting process, the committees and committee assignments, and the board's relationship to the staff; an introduction to the full board and to staff members with whom the new member will have ongoing interaction; and a pairing of each new member with a board partner for an initial period.

Like other groups, boards are often closed societies. People in power may withhold information or fail to reveal important expectations. Sometimes ongoing social relationships among current board members contribute to a feeling of isolation in newcomers. If their full participation is truly desired, board members should be included in social activities, greeted actively by other members by name, listened to in meetings, and assigned to committees where real work happens.

One of the most daunting and isolating occurrences for board members from minority groups is to state an opinion or offer a suggestion and to have others rephrase or ignore what has been said. Situations like this often occur when that board member offers an opinion or suggestion that has not been made before and may be outside the norm of the organization. Unless the organization is truly interested in change, that new member's statement may be rejected through silence or rephrasing of the statement. "Minority" board members who are highly placed, responsible people in their day-to-day work are not comfortable with such behavior and will eventually leave. Play an active role in correcting the situation: Invite that board member to reiterate his or her suggestion, and then support that member by urging the board to consider the suggestion seriously. If possible, the offending board member should be spoken to and made to understand the problem by a more sensitive member.

New board members should be recognized for the work they do for the organization. Do not assume that they will continually adjust to the organization and that the organization has no responsibility to adjust to them. Remember, board members serve in a volunteer capacity and have been actively recruited to participate. Give them positive reinforcement.

Let new board members know that you are open to invitations to participate in the activities of other organizations with which they are affiliated. Going out into diverse communities can open doors for a theatre and provide insights into activities that may expand and enhance its operations. It may reveal areas for possible collaboration, such as a co-sponsored performance featuring an artist from the community's cultural background, or a performance presented in the community instead of in the theatre. Activities that

On a yearly basis, evaluate the board's efforts to broaden its membership. Ask the "minority" members how they have felt about their participation, and how they have been received. Ask board members who have served for long periods of time how they feel about the experience. Discuss these issues in an open and supportive manner: Inclusion is to be celebrated, not hidden. If there are aspects of inclusion that do not work, make necessary adjustments rather than abandoning the effort. In keeping with the spirit of inclusion, let us remember one of the fundamental principles of change: Change is difficult, but it can happen effectively if it is the result of consultation and collaboration.

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