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Seminars for Arts Professionals

## AUGUST SEMINAR SUMMARY

### HOW TO BUILD A GREAT BOARD

Panel: David Fishel, author of *The Book of the Board*  
Dianne Davis, deputy chair of Griffin Theatre Company  
Robin Ayres, CEO of Arts Law Centre

If arts organisations were countries, then the board would be the Governor-General. A nonpartisan, omniscient body responsible for ensuring the organisation adheres to its own laws and stays true to its spirit. In other words, they're pretty important.

David Fishel, who wrote the influential *The Book of the Board*, has been on more boards than Morris lemma's had good press days. He talked us through the benefits and battles of boards at this month's SAMAG seminar.

#### Why are boards necessary?

Perhaps the question should be: are boards necessary? Fishel says that there's an argument for their redundancy. "Some boards don't add anything to an organisation. Often, they just strip time and effort from senior management. In extreme cases, they limit artistic expression – which, in an arts organisation, is quick death.

"Honestly, though, sometimes I think that boards are merely a habit. If we didn't have them, would we invent them?"

But Fishel also says that there are reasons to support the institution of the board. Obviously, they provide a system of checks and balances. Even more obviously, they're required by law. So there.

Importantly, boards can act as the public conscience of the organisation. Board members can add value through social networking, protecting staff from external pressures and making more informed decisions.

#### How do we make *our* board function effectively?

- Make the role of the board clear from the outset. Each member should have a job description.
- Be clear about the mission of the board.
- Enact a current marketing and strategic plan.
- Appoint a capable, skilled and communicative CEO who reports to the board regularly
- Have performance measures in place to check the progress of the organisation.
- Ensure that the CEO's work is informed by the mission statement of the organisation.
- Board members should acknowledge the CEO as trustworthy and honest.
- The CEO should have clear authority as set out in the mission statement.
- The board should receive monthly budgets and financial reports.
- The future of the organisation should be clearly mapped out by the board.
- All members of the board should attend and participate in meetings.
- An effective leader should be appointed as chairperson.
- Plan regular (but not too frequent) meetings.
- The board should be involved in advocacy and fundraising for the organisation.
- The board should celebrate its successes.

Sydney Arts Management Advisory Group [E info@samag.org](mailto:info@samag.org) [T \(02\) 8250 5722](tel:(02)82505722) [W www.samag.org](http://www.samag.org) [P 60 Margaret Street, Petersham NSW 2049](https://www.samag.org)



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### Advice for board members

Dianne Davis, of the Griffin Theatre, understands the importance of having a diverse board.

“Every board can benefit from having corporate and creative members – and let’s not forget that the two don’t have to be mutually exclusive. I think a lot of people judge members of boards from corporate backgrounds unfairly. Just because a board member’s day job is at a merchant bank or a law firm doesn’t mean they can’t effectively steer an arts organisation. Boards need people with different experiences and backgrounds – that’s the entire point of having a board!”

Boards have to balance risk-taking and innovation with stewardship and protection of assets. While the artistic director will obviously set the tone of the organisation, the board shouldn’t forget its role as leader. Use each meeting to tackle one strategic item, for a start. At the end of the day, the arts organisation is still a business. The board should ensure that it runs like one.

Having seen board members come and go, Robin Ayres has these tips for members:

- Use your power for good.
- Don’t put your fingers in the till.
- Remember that it’s ok to stuff up – but learn from your mistakes.
- Ignorance is no excuse.
- Don’t misplace your trust.
- Understand your legal obligations and responsibilities.

### Advice for senior management

As CEO of the Arts Law Centre, Robin Ayres reports to her board every month. She understands how important it is to provide a comprehensive account to board members. “Be prepared for their questions, should they have any.”

### The final word...

...comes from Fishel, of course.

“Boards are about governance, and governance is about people working together. There are laws and rules, but mostly, it’s about making sure people work together to guide an organisation, make it work more effectively and bring it to greatness.”

by: Lauren Smelcher