

Leading with Purpose: Governance and Sustainability Workshop

For Context: In person workshop attendees worked in small groups throughout the day to discuss the following scenarios. They applied the concepts learned during the workshop to their discussion (see slide deck and notes for more information.)

Pine Valley Heritage Center

At Pine Valley Heritage Center, the board has become deeply entangled in museum operations. Board President Greg Malone, who owns Malone Hardware downtown, regularly visits the museum unannounced. During these visits, he gives direct instructions to staff on exhibit layouts, offers unsolicited edits on social media posts, and rearranges event spaces without consulting the director.

Staff members are increasingly frustrated and uncertain about their roles—unsure whether to follow their director’s instructions or accommodate Greg’s spur-of-the-moment directives. Board meetings have transformed into discussions about minor operational details rather than strategic planning sessions. Executive Director Sasha Fields, once enthusiastic and effective, now feels undermined and is updating her resume. Staff turnover has begun to accelerate.

Financially, the museum is stable but growth has plateaued. Revenues and expenses consistently balance out at about \$250,000 annually. A modest \$75,000 reserve sits untouched, while staff hesitate to propose new initiatives. If the board agreed to reallocate even a small portion of next year’s budget surplus into a targeted development campaign—and leveraged their business networks to secure new grant support—they could realistically grow annual income by 20% within 18 months.

Recently, the museum missed a critical funding opportunity because the board’s insistence on reviewing minor brochure text delayed the submission. Board members seem unaware of their disruptive impact, believing their approach to be “hands-on” and supportive.

Discussion Questions:

Good governance means the board sets policy and trusts staff to carry it out.

- What consequences result when a board becomes overly involved in operations?
- How can clear boundaries between governance and operational roles be established and maintained?

Lessons from this scenario to strengthen your governance practices:

Willow Creek Arts & Cultural Center

Willow Creek Arts & Cultural Center is a beloved gathering place in town, offering rotating art exhibits, open mic nights, and seasonal festivals. The center's programs are well-attended, and local artists frequently volunteer their time and talents. The part-time staff and volunteers are dedicated and creative.

The center operates on a \$200,000 annual budget:

- 30% earned income (ticket sales, classes, rentals)
- 65% philanthropy (membership, annual appeals, individual gifts)
- 5% investment income (small CD and interest-bearing savings)
- There is a \$25,000 reserve fund, but no endowment or recurring major gifts

The challenge is the board: while well-meaning, it is largely disengaged. The board meets quarterly but often lacks a quorum, and attendance is inconsistent. The board president, a retired attorney named Diane Lyle, rarely communicates with the director outside of meetings. Fundraising is seen as the director's responsibility alone, and board recruitment has stalled.

Executive Director Maria Southall has led the organization for seven years and brings strong community relationships and fundraising instincts, but she's operating with little strategic guidance or support. Two recent grant opportunities were missed because no board member followed through on reference letters. Another potential donor backed away after receiving no follow-up communication from the board.

Despite the center's strong community response and promising potential, board disengagement is holding it back. Maria is now reconsidering whether she has the support she needs to lead the organization into its next chapter.

Discussion Questions:

Board service isn't passive. Good governance means asking hard questions, planning for the future, and holding the institutional mission in trust.

- What risks emerge when a board is too hands-off?
- What should shared leadership look like between staff and board?
- How can board members be re-engaged in meaningful ways that support the institution?

Lessons from this scenario to strengthen your governance practices:

Riverbend Cultural Heritage Museum

Riverbend Cultural Heritage Museum is located in the historic county courthouse. Originally launched by a coalition of civic clubs and retired educators, it has grown into a respected, nimble organization with a strong public presence. Riverbend hosts seasonal walking tours, a packed summer lecture series, and community-curated rotating exhibits.

The museum operates with a \$420,000 annual budget:

- 30% earned income (programs, events, rentals)
- 65% philanthropy (individual giving, memberships, corporate support)
- 5% investment income (small endowment draw, modest reserves)

Board President Carmen Vélez, a retired linotype technician and longtime preservation advocate, and Executive Director Warren Atkins, have stewarded Riverbend's growth by focusing on strategic alignment and clarity of roles. Carmen's leadership has helped reframe the board's role around governance, advocacy, and fundraising. Warren, once hired into a mostly reactive role, now works hand-in-hand with Carmen to advance a shared vision.

Recently, the museum faced a tough decision: whether to take on an ambitious exhibition and significant fundraising. Carmen ensured board buy-in by leading a focused planning retreat, while Warren secured a local match from two longtime donors. Together, they shaped a grant proposal that ultimately brought in \$75,000 over two years from a regional foundation. The result: a traveling exhibit, new partnerships with local schools and congregations, and a stronger sense of belonging among visitors. The museum café now hosts monthly game nights and storytelling sessions, often bringing together neighbors from across town who hadn't previously interacted.

The museum's next challenge: expanding its board with members who reflect the full range of the region's voices and support its role as a cultural connector.

Discussion Questions:

- How does leadership from both board and staff contribute to institutional momentum?
- How can effective governance impact sustainability?

Lessons from this scenario to strengthen your governance practices: