# Improving Nonprofit Organizational Outcomes through the Eyes of Organizational Stakeholders

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### Introduction

Grants to arts organizations fell by 22% (Lawrence & Mukai, 2011) between 2008 and 2009. Concurrently, arts attendance in the United States declined 4% from 2002-2008 (Iyengar, Bradshaw, Nichols, & National Endowment for the Arts. Research Division, 2009), and students receiving arts education declined from 64.6% to 49.5% between 1982 and 2008, which has been directly correlated to dropping arts attendance (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). The arts are facing a serious drop in public (Champarnaud, Ginsburgh, & Michel, 2008; Cowen, 2006; Urice, 1992) and private individual support (Thompson, Berger, Blomquist, & Allen, 2002).

These losses were exacerbated by the great recession of 2008; and while the recovery began in 2009, it has been slow in the nonprofit arts sector. It was not until 2012 that numbers began to increase back toward levels seen just before the recession (Cunniffee & Hawkins, 2016). While the nonprofit arts sector has experienced minor growth in terms of overall numbers in recent years, the recession exposed rapidly changing economic and attendance models and demonstrated the need for greater strategic planning in nonprofit arts organizations (Kushner & Cohen, 2014).

Similar changes occurred in nonprofit service agencies (Adams, 1995; Austin, 2003) and nonprofit health care (Allen, 2008; Rapert, 1996) almost two decades earlier, but were largely addressed through strategic planning (Begun, 2005; Kong, 2008; Wright & Bretthauer, 2010). These changes led researchers to question if there is a leadership void in addressing similar issues for nonprofit fine and performing arts organizations (Fiol & O'Connor, 2009). Leadership in the arts is unique for its duality of purpose (deVoogt, 2006), its focus on ever changing artistic product (Lapierre, 2001) and its egodriven participants (Lake, 2011). It has not traditionally focused on strategic planning of organizational outcomes (Bryson, 2010), especially when compared to other nonprofit service agencies (Cray, Inglis, & Freeman, 2007), and this may be influenced by poor stakeholder perceptions and low stakeholder participation in the strategic planning

process (Bryson, 2010; Bryson & Alston, 2005; Bryson, Crosby, & Bryson, 2009; Ketokivi & Castañer, 2004; Rezvani, 2011). Poor stakeholder perception of leadership is damaging to long-range organizational outcome planning for nonprofit arts organizations (Tschirhart, 1996), even though leadership in non-arts nonprofits has been shown to positively correlate to strategic planning and positive organizational outcomes (McClamroch, Byrd, & Sowell, 2001). The strategic planning of organizational outcomes of nonprofit arts organizations and how leadership plays a role in this planning is unknown and is a gap in current research. This research examined stakeholder perceptions of the outcomes or potential outcomes as led by strategic planning in nonprofit arts organizations.

## **Linking Stakeholder Perception and Outcome Measurement**

Stakeholder perception of organizational outcomes and their effectiveness or ineffectiveness as a construct is increasingly important to nonprofit organizations. The current political and funding environment means that nonprofits must demonstrate effectiveness (Thayer & Fine, 2001). Effectiveness, in terms of an organization, is frequently related to both organizational and stakeholder-determined goals. While there are various processes for evaluating effectiveness, most involve use of outcome measurement (MacIndoe & Barman, 2013). The multiple constituency model relates heavily to goals. It recognizes that organizations have multiple stakeholders (constituents) who will use different criteria to deem an organization effective or ineffective (D'Aunno, 1992). This model also recognizes that within an organization, there are often a variety of stakeholders with potentially variant goals, requiring that organizations recognize these differences for effective planning and goal setting. Goaloriented evaluation of outcomes is somewhat problematic for nonprofit arts organizations, as goals are often broad and value-laden, making them difficult to objectively assess (Buckmaster, 1988). Nonprofit arts organizations serve the community through the creation of subjectively aesthetic products of which determination of quality may require long-term evaluation, while immediate organizational efficiencies may require more responsive evaluation. As a result, participatory evaluation models, where the stakeholders participate in various phases and tasks of an evaluation have been demonstrated to have greater immediate impact with nonprofits (Thayer & Fine, 2001).

Outcomes for an organization define what the program wants to accomplish and are crucial to stakeholders. Outcome measurement can be a learning tool for organizations and deals with how the organization effects external environments. Feedback from stakeholders prompts a response in an organization that should lead to new or modified strategies in management (Buchkmaster, 1988). Programs that are similar in the nonprofit arena will face comparison of outcomes, and these comparisons across nonprofits have been reported since the 1990s leading to the growth of outcome measurement (Greenway, 1996).

Increasingly, organizations are being required to demonstrate that specified goals have been achieved. Organizations and stakeholders appear to find value in outcome measurement and those where stakeholders have high participation appear to be more useful than when participation is low (Thayer & Fine, 2001). Stakeholders can be counted on to act upon their assessments of organizational outcomes; however, the judgment of effectiveness of an organization among stakeholders may vary markedly and is often not related to objective indicators of effectiveness (Herman & Renz, 1997).

Judgments of effectiveness appear to be most related to organizational size (Herman & Renz, 1997). In this study, half of the participating organizations were considered substantial in size (annual operating budget of \$1 million or greater) and half were considered smaller. In a later and larger sample size study, Herman et al. reported that size as measured by total revenues continued to be associated with judgment of effectiveness and was also correlated with objective indicators of effectiveness (1998). Organizational characteristics such as organizational age and board prestige for example, also appear correlated with objective effectiveness (Herman & Renz, 1998). In the execution of this research, consideration was given to the interpretation of stakeholders' assessments of outcomes for organizations as results can be correlated with type of organization studied (e.g. especially effective versus less effective) and therefore may be organizationally specific (Herman & Renz, 1998). For those organizations deemed less effective, use of correct procedures and new revenue seeking practices may improve stakeholder judgment of effectiveness. Factors driving internal stakeholders may be distinct from those that impact providers (MacIndoe & Barman, 2013) and outcome measurements may fall short on true characterization of nonprofit performance (Benjamin, 2012). Continuing communication is crucial to understanding stakeholder goals that lead to judgments of effectiveness. The growing concern among stakeholders regarding outcomes makes research in this area crucial.

# **Background and Methodology**

This study was conducted to explore stakeholder perceptions regarding a misalignment between existing planned or unplanned organizational outcomes, and those outcomes stakeholders find to be most pressing. The study was conducted as the third and final part of a broader single case study to examine stakeholder perceptions on three interrelated lenses: strategic planning, authentic leadership in strategic planning, and organizational outcomes. The case for all three sections of the study used a nonprobability sampling procedure (Yin, 2009). The primary researcher was embedded in Detroit arts for almost a decade, so personal contacts known to the researcher to have participated in planning at nonprofit arts organizations in the metropolitan Detroit area were contacted. While this could create a bias and possible issues of coercion, the researcher's knowledge of Detroit arts organizations allowed for a more broad study than might occur with random sampling, and personal contacts were more likely to be receptive to participation. Additionally, a list of holders of nonprofit tax-exempt status that self-identified in the fine and performing arts was created from Guidestar.com. Eight organizations agreed to participate in the study. Participating organizations represented included two museums, two orchestras, two theatres, and two dance companies. Four of the organizations having annual budgets exceeding \$1 million, a benchmark generally considered as larger for a local nonprofit arts organization, and four having budgets under that threshold. Organizational contacts provided emails for potential participants who were contacted and asked to participate in a telephone interview of approximately 60 minutes, to answer questions pertinent to the research topic. At the point of saturation, where no new data was being collected, 30 stakeholders had been interviewed. Data was interpreted using Atlas.ti, a proprietary software to aid in determining themes among data collected in qualitative studies. The data was examined by two researchers to ensure greater consistency between results.

The Guidestar.com generated list created certain limitations, as it accounts only for organizations that have submitted nonprofit tax returns, and it could omit smaller organizations not required to file, or newer organizations just developing long-range plans. However, this limitation also ensured that participating organizations had some history of practice.

In the context of the stakeholder interviews, three separate lenses were used to focus on long-term strategy. The first part of the study focused on stakeholder perceptions of the interaction between authentic leadership and strategic planning. Results indicate that authentic leadership is not adequately applied in the strategic planning of the sample nonprofits in metropolitan Detroit. Further, there is an implication that improved leadership would lead to more successful strategic planning and more positive outcomes (Rhine, 2015).

The second part of the study examined how stakeholders perceive authentic leadership traits and strategic planning interact with and effect organizational outcomes directly. The results demonstrate five key components regarding authentic leadership and its bearing on organizational outcomes in the sample nonprofit arts organizations: 1) Authentic leadership traits bear on organizational outcomes; 2) Authentic leadership traits appear essential in fundraising, a key distinction between leadership in for-profits and nonprofits; 3) Authentic leadership traits directly effect organizational outcomes associated with volunteers and members, a second key distinction between for-profits and nonprofits; 4) Authentic leadership traits are not a main factor in the organizational outcome of sales, though they may have an indirect effect through mediating factors; 5) An equal distribution of the dual foci of art and business is a hallmark of strategic planning that will lead to more positive organizational outcomes (Rhine, 2015b).

This third part of the study was undertaken to examine stakeholder perceptions of needed organizational outcomes within the framework of existing planned or unplanned outcomes. Respondents were asked to share their opinions regarding exactly how organizational outcomes could be improved.

In this third-part, the specific research question addressed is:

RQ: "What common recommendations do stakeholders offer to address the organizational outcome problems of declining attendance, decreases in arts education, and diminishing public and private funding for nonprofit fine and performing arts organizations in the metropolitan area of Detroit, Michigan?

The research is significant because it attempts to fill a gap in the literature regarding stakeholder perception of organizational outcomes as a result of planning. There is a need for further research to understand more completely the theoretical as well as the practical needs of nonprofits. Such research can lead to a means for how to develop and then devise implementation procedures for differing types of organizations, including nonprofit arts organizations facing unique circumstances. This research can address issues such as conflicting goals and ambiguous situations, and can specify roles for strategic planners. Such clarification is needed for effective arts leadership in the new and changing global economy (Bryson, 2010).

## Significance of the Research

The arts are facing declines in many areas: support (Lawrence & Mukai, 2011), declining attendance (Iyengar et al., 2009), arts education (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011), and public (Champarnaud et al., 2008; Cowen, 2006; Urice, 1992) and private individual

support (Thompson et al., 2002). These changes have caused researchers to question if there is a leadership void in addressing similar issues in nonprofit fine and performing arts organizations (Fiol & O'Connor, 2009). Nonprofit arts organizations have not typically focused on strategic planning for improved organizational outcomes (Bryson, 2010). The organizational outcomes of strategic planning in nonprofit arts organizations are unknown and were therefore the focus of this research. This research examined stakeholder perceptions of improvement methods for organizational outcomes in nonprofit arts organizations.

The research is significant because it attempts to fill a gap in the literature regarding stakeholder perceptions of strategic planning organizational outcomes in nonprofit arts organizations. The prevailing literature, as noted above, supports the study and its potential outcomes, especially if one acknowledges the notion that leadership is a predictive factor in determining employee creativity. This suggests that leaders can address creative needs of organizations by changing or improving organizational authentic leadership (Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Cunha, 2010).

## **Recommendations to Address Organizational Outcomes**

This section discusses data that informs the core research question, "What common recommendations do stakeholders offer to address the organizational outcome problems of declining attendance, decreases in arts education, and diminishing public and private funding for nonprofit fine and performing arts organizations in the metropolitan area of Detroit, Michigan?" The reported data appears in the themes in which they are presented. Discussion and conclusions follow the data presentation.

**Donations and fundraising.** "Well, I think first thing is first, fundraising, fundraising, fundraising (respondent #14)." Some respondents suggested changes they felt would improve fundraising efforts. Simple changes were suggested, such as "raise admission prices, don't pressure donors (respondent #23)." An employee reported that, "I think that if we could get more members, there would be more donations (respondent #25)."

A number of respondents suggested hiring staff for fundraising, especially grant writing. Larger organizations could even be in need of entire development teams to focus on revenue (respondent #4). As recommended by a member of organization 2, "I think they should get a grant to pay for a fundraiser. It would make a lot more sense than asking people to write checks over and over. That would get more people buying tickets (respondent #27)."

Marketing, publicity, and community outreach. A number of respondents felt that advertising for their organization could be improved. Some simply called for "a lot more advertising (respondent #26)," while others perceived a need to acquire donated ads (respondent #12). Some respondents focused on how improvements in marketing strategies could improve membership. A member of organization 1 suggested the organizations make, "institutional marketing a focus of a daily meeting... Organizations that do it will have that focus and it's an almost daily conversation (respondent #7)." Collaboration between the board and marketing was suggested to improve membership enrollment levels for organization 5. "Maybe the board, or my supervisor could sit down with marketing...I think that the marketing department would have to focus more on the memberships and less on individual exhibits...because when people come once, they are probably going to want a membership if they like what they see (respondent #24)."

Strategies to attract new members. The president of organization 7 suggested free concerts and events for new members, as well as creating new positions to focus on attracting new members (respondent #10). In general, publicity was seen as an area in need of improvement. Some respondents thought it was important that their organization "meet with the general membership and public more frequently (respondent #31)," and "talk to (their) audience members and…not just do big blockbuster hits, but shows that will sell (respondent #8)."

**Organizational structure.** Redefining organizational structure was important for two organizations in particular. A member of organization 1 wanted to respond to the difficulty of successfully planning due to a diffused leadership structure by restructuring power to be more concentrated. Organization 7 recently went through a change that imposed a great deal more responsibility on volunteers, which a number of stakeholders perceived would create problems for the organization. It was suggested the organization "redefine the 'organizational structure' objective (respondent #21)."

Strategic planning process. Disorganization was seen as a problem in strategic planning for a number of organizations. Respondents addressed this by suggesting better-defined roles in the planning process. "I think we would have things laid out better and organized more. Maybe if someone were responsible for overseeing the whole planning and making sure everything got executed the right way (respondent 22)." Others stressed simplicity and following through on the entire process. "I would start with a very clear strategic planning to find out what people want to do. I would bring in data from previous years and listen to that data. Then start implementing. Hear everyone out, make tough decisions, then apply them (respondent #6)."

Education and programming. Improvements in programming were of concern to some respondents. Organization 2 works with K-12 students, and a director suggested creating college level classes (respondent #18), and "a program through our company for those with the dedication and passion [to] fast-track to a professional level (respondent #17)." Similarly, a member of organization 1, which focuses on education, suggested hiring staff to oversee education and programming, and who can also act as a liaison to the educational system. Medium and large organizations recommended efforts to encourage more fieldtrip visits to their organization (respondent #29), as well as lobbying efforts to start in-classroom workshops for arts education (respondent #23).

**Growth.** It was suggested that some smaller organizations could be ready to expand. For example, organization 2 "could expand even bigger than they are today. They really need to get their name out there more, open up a couple other locations in southeastern Michigan (respondent #19)."

Art and business balance. Many respondents focused on addressing the balance between art and business in their organization. A number of participants felt that their organization needed more attention focused on art and creativity. Suggestions to address this included creating positions such as artistic liaison and artistic director in organizations that currently lack such positions (respondent #7), and including more artists in the strategic planning process (respondent #28). A board member of organization 1 felt that having a greater artistic influence on the board could produce more interesting (art) and appeal to a younger audience (respondent #12).

Conversely, a number of respondents felt there was a need for a stronger business perspective in their organization (respondent #14). Some recommended an extreme

restructuring of their organization, and a reeducation of those involved in it. "First thing I would do is start from the bottom up, I would create an efficient organizational structure...I would give (everyone in the organization) a little crash course at business. I would try to make them look at the organization as a business and not so much as an organization (respondent #15)."

Others suggest a general sharing of power to encourage more business-oriented innovation on all levels of the organization. "People were afraid to do new innovative things. I want to hear from the people producing the work and get them in a room talking to each other. There is a fear of too much empowerment in each of the individual departments. It's supposed to be this great learning opportunity but they are not being allowed to solve the problem. The people in charge are afraid of giving up too much power (respondent #8)."

**Discussion and conclusions.** Interview questions related to the research question asked respondents to simply discuss in their own words solutions they saw to problems leading to poor outcomes, and how to fix them. Responses appeared in eight themes. The themes are: Increase donations and fundraising, improve marketing, publicity, and community outreach, develop strategies to attract new members, improve organizational structure, improves strategic planning, improve educational programming, grow, and balance art and business more appropriately.

A surprising result of this collection is that, there was no theme specifically related to improving, changing, or focusing more on the artistic product itself. While the art may be at the heart of these organizations' missions, of the eight themes in respondent recommendations, seven specifically focus on improving business-related functions. Only the last theme, the notion of balancing business and art more appropriately, which recurred throughout all three phases of the study, has mention of the artistic product. The implication from this section is that the balance presently tips toward a stronger focus on artistic product, and much can be done to add further focus on business tasks to equalize that balance.

The research question considered stakeholder observations about the interaction between strategic planning and organizational outcomes. The data suggest that while stakeholders observe a direct correlation between strategic planning and organizational outcomes there are two clear issues. The first issue is that these organizations are largely lacking effective strategic planning, which could possibly be the cause of decline. The second issue is that effective strategic planning in these organizations requires an appropriate balance between the dual foci of art and commerce. The latter finding develops a whole new field of inquiry into what an appropriate balance of art and commerce is in nonprofit arts strategic planning, how it can be achieved, and what results it may garner. Further study may inquire into both the rationale for a lack of effective strategic planning, as well as a collection of empirical evidence to examine whether strategic planning in arts organizations improves through an effective balance of art and commerce. Such examinations may begin to uncover the root cause for the lack of effective strategic planning, which may, in fact, be because there is no theory on balancing art and commerce in strategic planning in nonprofit arts organizations. Current theory recognizes authentic leadership traits as paramount in effectively planning (McClamroch et al., 2001), but does not consider that authenticity may need to genuinely focus on dual lenses.

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