

Administrative Lessons from Twenty-eight Years as a Garden Director

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Being a Director...

Being director is not about how you are treated; it is about how you treat others.

You've been hired as director. You have advanced degrees and experiences. Your first thought might be that you deserve respect and that your authority is to be honored. I found that my treatment of others determined how well I was accepted and respected. Be open, thoughtful, reflective, and fair to those around you.

If you don't like the conversation, change the conversation.

Your job is not to react and be defensive in a conversation created by others, but to set the context and terms of the discussion.

You are alone—be open to all opinions, avoid developing sides, alliances, and friendships.

Act on principles, not on friendships. Everyone is equally your friend and your enemy, your supporter and your antagonist—and these roles will shift through time. You can do nothing about this. You may agree with some more than others. Some may support you more than others. But act on your view of truth, not out of favors and friendships (or, for that matter, retaliations). Supporters and antagonists will change over the years and from issue to issue. This is a good thing. In other words, you can't go out with the same people for lunch every week! Celebrate thoughtfulness, reasoning, consistency, and being alone. Folks will get the fairness, even if they don't like the decision.

You are a football coach.

A director is like a coach—and you will never, or at least rarely, have a star player at every position (or even if they are stars in some ways, their stardom is likely still under development or their stardom conflicts with that of the other stars). Even if you had stars at every position, they'd still need a coach to get them coordinated. So you have to do the best with the team you have, and put them in a position to win. Also, the coach delegates—the coach is not on the field. Review the tape afterward with all involved and plan for the next game.

Be direct; a transparent story doesn't require a good memory.

Liars need to remember which story they told and to whom they told it, but truth tellers have only one story. This is easier on the brain. Most directors would not actually lie, of course, but they are often tempted to obscure reality if they think others will disagree or be angry. But that layer of obscurity hangs in the air and makes the whole situation worse.

Be responsive and be clear about the timeline because it will be slower than folks want.

The higher up the supervisory chain, the slower the response, so be sensitive to the needs of supervisees. An administrator may perceive a decision as having a month's timeline, whereas the affected employees are probably thinking it has a week's duration at most.

Create positive value, not just response to despair and darkness.

Resist the temptation to talk about dire circumstances in a way that suggests you and your institution are only important because of the hole you find yourselves in. Acknowledge the obstacles, but sell the vision of what you all could do to make the world better in the future. While it would be great if all dire circumstances went away, this is unlikely. But don't define yourself and your institution by the negatives—even if they go away, you'll still have to define the positive you want to do.

Spontaneous generation: You don't always have to be in the room.

When a director enters the room, she or he disturbs the water like a pebble cast into a still pool. This is unavoidable—you will never enter a room again as “not-the-director.” There are times when the staff and board need to plumb the depths of their thoughts on their own. Being present for that meeting may mean that others are lobbying you rather than talking to each other, or waiting for your reaction before they speak. Enjoy watching parts of the organization become self-organizing and functional. I'm reminded of the first time I walked into the living room to see my six-year-old daughter and four-year-old son sitting on the couch having a self-contained, self-organized, and self-motivated conversation. I was astonished. It was like spontaneous generation.

In the end, you do have the power.

Remember, you are the director, so you can be patient and can let others run with the ball—you can always blow the whistle or change direction.

Stepping into the darkness, moving all in.

You will have to step into the darkness. We hired our first fundraiser without knowing when that decision would pay for itself. We built and opened a building when we didn't have all the budget or staff we needed. It's a fine line, I know—you can't be reckless, of course, and you will have to make the decision with uncertainty. When we were set to build a new building, we did not have quite enough money to do everything, but I



sensed that the time had come, and that donors and board were getting restless about the project ever starting. We crossed the 85 percent threshold of funding, with some possibilities still lurking, so I used an analogy from Texas hold 'em poker and announced at a board meeting that we were “going all in,” meaning that we were pushing all our chips in and would play out the hand. Things turned out well—and looking back I see we had fall back positions if things went poorly (e.g., opening only part of the building), so maybe it wasn't as bold a move as I thought it was at the time. Remember, hindsight is always 20/20.

Keep focused on the end point and play for victory.

We failed a few times. Once we did not get a grant. The town council voted to delay action on closing a road. I vowed this would not happen again. I studied the successful grant recipients and the reviews we had gotten. I rewrote the sections of the grant that had gotten low marks. We almost never failed again with that granting organization. I organized a committee to work with our neighbors, and we met for two years to explore common ground. We raised money and improved an intersection, put in a new bike corridor and ended up with a unanimous town council vote to close the road. It was compromise. It cost money. I was just unwilling to ever go to that decision point again without a very high chance of winning. The road is closed and replaced with wildflower displays. Success is partly being wonderful—but it is partly being methodically persistent. Don't accept defeat after one strike.

I have a dream...repeat message.

Once I was giving a speech outdoors and my pages were fluttered by a sudden gust of wind. I managed to keep them on the lectern, but they had gotten out of order. As I finished one page and turned to the next, it turned out to be one I had already read. By then, it was too late and I was already into the first set of lines. I did summarize a bit, but basically gave that part of the speech over again. Later board members said it was one of the best speeches I had ever given. After thinking about this, I realized I had reinvented the sort of style of Martin Luther King's “I have a dream” speech in that I had come back to lines I had already given. Remember the audience is hearing it for the first time and so you can tell them several times, repeating the lines—perhaps more thoughtfully or with different emphasis the second and third times. This helps you be emphatic and insistent. In fact, I paused during this speech because I was surprised to realize the same page was before me, adding a dramatic flair. When you do repeat yourself, don't weaken this by saying “as I just told you...”, “as I said earlier...”, “as I stated at the last meeting...” These phrases blunt the emphasis and make you sound cranky and like you're blaming others for your need to repeat yourself.

Ask people to dance.

One is tempted to believe (and staff and board were very tempted to believe) that the more wonderful your institution is; the more support will come your way. As we entered construction, one board member put all of his faith in one sign that would tell the public



what we were up to and thought that with that, money would flow in. It is great to be wonderful, of course, and the sign was a good thing to do, but you have to ask others to dance, rather than wait on the sidelines. The wallflower version of fundraising doesn't work.

Give if you want others to give.

Asking for money is a whole lot easier if you yourself have given some. The number of zeroes doesn't matter—everyone has a different range and all gifts are equally generous when income and other causes are taken into consideration.

Right brain, left brain.

Gardens are about science, but also about art, about knowledge and emotion, about facts and spirit. Appeal to the whole human being and invite staff, board, volunteers, students, and visitors to be whole people. Gardens can do this better than most cultural institutions. It's more fun. Gardens have sun, blue sky, rich brown soil, spring's sudden pace, color, fragrance, and the buzzing of insects!

Float all boats higher.

Priorities exist, but a successful institution has many parts and supporters will gravitate towards different aspects of what you do. By not restricting folks to a few priorities, you are enlarging the family and the sum of the parts will be a successful enterprise that inspires higher levels of support in general. Our family loved different parts of us—the natural areas, the herbarium, the 1903 campus arboretum, the children's programs, the 1919 stone amphitheater... At first, as a PhD, I thought my role was to focus on a new research building, but I soon found that that would be more likely, our family of supporters would be wider, and our institutions would be viewed as more valuable, if I viewed my job as being devoted to ratcheting up the whole—the mosaic of programs that defined us.

Involve all levels.

Involve staff, board, and volunteers at all levels for long-term planning (e.g., when we were planning a building, we divided into four teams and fanned out across the country on field trips to see other buildings—every staff member went on at least one trip). Thinking and decision-making, no matter how right or wrong, are more stable when they have a wide platform below. People are unique: a diversity of people leads to a more robust set of diverse ideas.

Meetings

Be prepared for meetings, have a script, explore possible reactions, talk out and test your ideas. Practice out loud. Put timelines on agenda items and if a particular item is not in the state to be resolved, be prepared to table it and forward it to a subcommittee or to the next meeting. Give space for everyone to speak to the agenda items.

Put your face and self into the work.

You have to walk the halls and talk to people. Actions have to be associated with you, not handed down through others.

You can't fix everything for all time.

You won't be director forever, and what you want is to position your institution so that you can hand it off to the next leader like a baton in the relay race. You can never fix everything and the decades ahead will present new challenges long after you are gone. Your job is to hand the work off in the best possible shape.

Things to Get Over Because They Just Come with the Territory of Being Director...

Classic board-staff conflicts

The staff thinks that the board doesn't see the everyday real world characterized by a lack of resources and time. The staff also thinks that the board thinks that the big problem is the lack of good ideas. The staff thinks that there are plenty of good ideas, just not enough resources. The board thinks the staff won't make them feel part of the organization, is resistant to change, can't see the forest for the trees, ignores their good ideas and responds to ideas with "we've tried that and it didn't work." The staff just wants more unrestricted funding. The board wants to feel that it isn't just their money, but that their ideas matter and they are part of the organization. The staff wants the board out of day-to-day operational decisions. If the board feels they keep hitting brick walls of staff reaction, they eventually will want to do their own projects without staff (or leave the organization). These are inevitable situations that can go as badly as you let them go. The director has to hold everyone's hands through this situation. Mixing folks in planning groups is a step to dissolving the barriers between staff and board.

A fellow director's first week on the job.

A fellow director told me the story of how his first week as director started with feelings of excitement and ended with feelings of despair. Everyone wanted to talk to him: staff from many departments, the board, the emeritus board, the neighborhood association, the local city council, the local garden clubs, and donors. Each entity had different issues, complaints, needs, and ideas for the future. At the end of the week (and obviously this is macabre exaggeration), he said he wanted to "slit his wrists" because he would not have time to "feed all the baby birds in the nest" in any typical week. He was moving rapidly from one brushfire to the next, unable to put any of them out, and feeling that the week was simply too short. This is another simple fact: get used to it. Your life is a shifting experience of people and ideas. Get the most out of it; try to get folks rowing in a good direction. Be clear when you have to disappoint some folks and decline some agendas. Accept that you will have to live with the consequences.

Everything successful is because of staff; everything unsuccessful is because of the director.

This is one reason you are paid more. Plus, defending yourself only makes you a bitter, self-centered person, no matter how justified you think you are. Just change the conservation (see above). It doesn't matter anyway in the long run. The world will neither extensively note, nor long remember these squabbles. When you retire, your good deeds will be noted!

People...

Hiring is critical.

Everything flows from the hiring decision—a good one means that a part of your organization will develop its own momentum; a poor one will eat up tons of time. Have broad interview committees to help with this. At a university, young professors wonder nervously if they will get tenure, and it seems impossible since one can always do more—but having been on hiring and tenure committees, what I know is that we tried to hire people who could get tenure simply by continuing to be who they were on the trajectory they were on. In this way, the hiring decision was the critical step.

Defensive driving in administration.

One can arrive at a concert safe and sound and on time. One can arrive at the same concert after four speeding tickets and three accidents. In particular, personnel issues always have the capacity to consume huge amounts of time. The issue is not only what is to be done, but how it is done. You can steer a personnel issue into or away from tickets and accidents and arrive at the same place.

The Red/Green color blindness lesson.

At the federal training center where I teach, the staff reviews all PowerPoint documents to ensure they are visible to those with color blindness and requires instructors to go through this review. Roughly seven percent of people are color blind and they will complain if they cannot “see” the slides. Analogously, when supervising others, one must take into account all types of people—from the highly sensitive to the very thick skinned.

Predictability of reward and pain.

A lab experiment showed that lab animals exposed to the same amount of pain (electric shocks) and reward (food) varied in the number of ulcers and incidents of high blood pressure they experienced. Those in charge of their pain (they pushed the feeding button and got both the food and the shock predictably) were healthy; those not in control (the pain happened at random times relative to feeding) developed ulcers and high blood pressure even though both groups got the same overall quantity of food and electrical shocks. Likewise, administrators are in charge of decisions. If decisions are made with input from staff and board so that the latter feel listened to and respected,



even if others don't agree, they will be healthier. If decisions appear to be made capriciously, morale and health will suffer.

The winter wind and summer sun.

The winter wind and the summer sun have a contest to see who can get a horseback rider to take off his coat. The winter wind blows, but the horseback rider just buttons his coat more tightly; the sun shines and the rider is so hot he takes off his coat. Supervisors have power, and what they do is perceived as "weighty." Recognize that you are in a position of power with relation to the employees you supervise. Interactions that would be acceptable among peers may be inappropriate when there is a supervisor-supervisee relationship. Communicate with tact and awareness of your respective ranks.

A Closing Lesson...

As these thoughts might suggest, I also learned an inordinate empathy for all who have had, at one time or another, the title of Director added to their name. If you are welcoming a crowd or introducing a speaker and other directors are in the audience, welcome them by name!