

CASE STUDY: Against the Grain Theatre - Evolving through Governance

The Creative Champions Network's (CCN) *Get on Board: Workshop and Speaker Series* presents a case study on Against the Grain Theatre, with information consolidated from the Ontario Not-for-profit Network (ONN), in collaboration with Ignite NPS through their *Reimagining Governance* project.

Utilizing this scenario and analyzing the issues presented, members will work together to answer their specific governance questions and apply their knowledge as a group to develop analytical skills they can later apply to their own organizations.

Overview: Against the Grain Theatre Profile

Against the Grain Theatre (AtG) is an opera and vocal works company that creates trail-blazing and genre-bending works through its innovative storytelling and programming. AtG is committed to revitalizing the operatic form to a more diverse range of audiences and is working towards establishing its presence on a national scope.ⁱ The company is currently operated by a small team of 2-3 full-time staff.ⁱⁱ

AtG has undergone exponential growth and change in the last few years, which raises several structural issues within the organization. For the last 13 years, AtG has mainly been founder-led with the Board playing a hands-on role; however, this has begun to change.ⁱⁱⁱ Recently, the team has moved towards an all-virtual workplace, and the Board is transitioning to a governance board.

Sustainable organizations are built on strong, cohesive work cultures - all of which are enacted by shared values and the intentional decisions made over its rules and regulations, as well as the delegation of roles and responsibilities. With its current growth and changes, a divide has formed between the culture of the Board (more traditional and less innovative) and the culture of the staff (embedded in the needs of the community and responsive to those needs). This structure has become incongruent with the organization's vision and values in creativity - being a theatre company that explores "out of the box" ideas.^{iv}



This impact on the organization has created a boiling point where management feels the Board culture is out of line with what AtG needs to move forward. The following challenges are highlighted:

1. **A need to redefine and reimagine the delegation of responsibilities between the staff and the Board.** AtG is stuck in a state of limbo due to its lack of defined structure, causing uncertainty from the Board. This inconsistency of roles and boundaries has resulted in the micromanagement of staff and a misunderstanding of what a governance board should function like. AtG must figure out how to shift its culture from being one

that is founder-led, to one that is led by its workers and the Board in their respective roles.

2. **Realignment of organizational culture so that management and the Board are on the same page.** It is critical for the culture within an organization to be cohesive, or friction will arise. At AtG, there is a significant cultural disconnect between the Board, team members, and the artists they work with. This struggle to find a balance between ways of working and mindsets is critical, as it affects all levels of the organization and the projects that are produced.
3. **Becoming more proactive rather than reactive as an organization.**^v Despite operating for 13 years now, AtG is still in its “start-up mode” mindset, where they tackle their problems as they arrive, triaging and reinventing the wheel to solve them rather than getting ahead of the issues. As AtG grows on a national level, the organization must adopt a more sustainable way of working, establishing procedures and systems in place to become more resilient to unexpected issues and change.

The growth that AtG is experiencing has made it even more critical for the team members involved to evolve their governance accordingly. How can Against the Grain Theatre disentangle its structure and piece it back together in a more *intentional* way that creates a stronger foundation and path forward?

Questions to consider:

- How does this misalignment affect how Against the Grain Theatre operates, makes decisions, collaborates with others and solves problems?
- What are the implications of having a misalignment in the theatre’s organizational governance vs. its culture?
- What can be done at AtG to build a healthy and vibrant company?
- How can AtG clarify what they are doing and why they are making those decisions?
- With this new change in the work environment, how can they restructure their new framework to serve the impact that they want to have?
- How do they want to collaborate with each other within the company but also with external stakeholders?

Definitions:

Governance culture - a culmination of values, mindsets, and ways of interacting.

Values - the important core beliefs that shape and influence governance. They can be intentionally declared or just assumed by the organization, such as a belief in equity, integrity, innovation, and accountability.

Mindsets - attitudes and ways of thinking which are held collectively and individually by those who participate in governance. They are informed by personal values, beliefs, assumptions, feelings, and philosophical perspectives, which in turn are shaped by factors such as life experiences and dominant societal ideologies. For example, views on justice, assumptions about how governance must be done, personal comfort levels with risk, and perceptions about what equity means.

Ways of interacting - how those who participate in governance act together and toward others. They are linked to values and mindsets and can be intentionally set as well as based on personalities or habits and norms that form over the years, without deep attention to them.^{vi}

End Notes

ⁱ Reimagining Governance. n.d. "LEARNING LAB SPOTLIGHT: Against the Grain Theatre's journey towards intentional governance design." Accessed October 19, 2023. https://nonprofitresources.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Against-the-Grain-Theatres-journey-towards-intentional-governance-design-Learning-Lab-Spotlight_final.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Whifen, Robin. 2023. "Founder & Artistic Director Joel Ivany Stepping Back from AtG – Against the Grain Theatre." Against the Grain Theatre. <https://atgtheatre.com/founder-amp-artistic-director-joel-ivany-stepping-back-from-against-the-grain-theatre/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Whiffen, Robin. & Dougherty, I. 2023. "Against the Grain Theatre on working with governance culture to reimagine governance." Transcript of speech delivered on YouTube, October 18, 2023. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zkRWFkmHZV038oifZ1sC6L6QAoPm43gW/view>.

^{iv} Reimagining Governance. n.d

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Reimagining Governance. n.d. "Governance culture in a nonprofit organization Resource." ONN Resource Centre. Accessed October 20, 2023. https://nonprofitresources.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Governance-culture-in-a-nonprofit-organization-resource_final.pdf.