The Performance



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Despite the fact that I have two left feet and a tin ear, I enjoy going to the theater to see talented professionals dance and sing. Of course it's possible that my lack of talent and skill in these "departments" makes me an especially appreciative audience member. Last evening I attended a wonderful performance by the *New York City Ballet*. One of the pieces performed by the company was entitled "Fearful Symmetries." Choreographed by the company's Ballet Master in Chief, Peter Martins, "Fearful Symmetries" features twenty three dancers: two principal couples, a soloist couple, three corps men, six corps women, and four corps couples. The dizzying pace of the dance and pulsing score by John Adams brought to mind the complexity (and sometimes chaos!) that ensues when leaders of a nonprofit attempt to keep their organizations mission-focused and simultaneously moving in multiple directions to seize opportunities and avoid downside risks.

Like other brilliantly choreographed pieces, "Fearful Symmetries" is hard to watch. When a large number of corps members were on stage, I struggled trying to decide whether to focus my attention on one or two principal dancers, or scan the stage to discern the distinctive patterns and rhythm of the dance. But despite my attempt to seek it all, when the dancers step forward to bow at the end, I noticed several dancers who seemed unfamiliar. Where were they in the piece? How could I have missed their individual performances?

The mission of most nonprofits is clear and compelling. And most leaders of nonprofit organizations bring the clarity of mission and purpose to their deliberations in the board room. But in between a clear mission statement and the ends the nonprofit seeks, there is a flurry of activity that is hard to fully appreciate or evaluate. As I watched "Fearful Symmetries" last night I caught myself trying to anticipate the ebb and flow of the dance. But the pace of Adams' score and the energy with which the piece is performed, made that impossible. The best I could do was to try to keep up with one or two dancers at a particular moment.

In a nonprofit organization, the board and staff team are collectively responsible for training their attention on the organization's fully-choreographed performance. The board must try to step back and look at how the performers work together to bring the nonprofit's mission to life, and resist the urge to see the nonprofit's destiny linked to the availability or effectiveness of a single performer. The contributions of every team member bring your nonprofit's mission to life.

Individual staff members in a nonprofit are asked to perform their assigned, interlocking and interdependent roles. But like the members of a professional dance company, it is never sufficient to simply study one's

assigned part. A supervisor who limits an employee's training to the specific tasks at hand robs the organization of the contribution that the employee could make if she understood how her role fit into the nonprofit's story. A dancer understands how his or her role fits into the story being told or portrayed on stage.

One of the aspects of professional dance companies that always amazes me is how continuity planning is embedded in the planning process for a performance. When a piece like "Fearful Symmetries" is being performed on successive nights, different members of the company are featured as principal dancers and soloists each evening. This means that the dancers must master several parts in the dance. Although this adds rehearsal time to the process, I imagine that doing so is extraordinarily helpful in seeing and understanding how the pieces fit together, and how the roles and components of the dance are interdependent. And of course it is necessary to ensure that the "show" will go on, even if one dancer is temporarily unable to perform.

We can learn a lot from our counterparts in the theater. Taking the time required to learn and appreciate others' roles is essential to ensuring the continuity of our missions. Our "show" must also go on. And appreciating the artistry, talent and skill of your fellow team members is central to appreciating the opportunities and downside risks that exist in every "Act" of your nonprofit's story.

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