

By Ellen Hirzy

The weighty words often used to describe mission, values, and vision — foundation, cornerstone, pillars — announce their significance. But creative leadership can transform these guiding principles from noble statements into active tools for effective governance. Every community arts education organization has a mission statement to describe why it exists and what it does to meet those needs. Many articulate values, the deeply held beliefs that guide everything they do, and vision, to convey how the community will change when the organization succeeds at its mission. Organizational consultant Kay Sprinkel Grace describes mission as “the compass — the true north for the organization” and vision as the inspiration and the destination.

Vision can be the liveliest, most fulfilling concept for a board to consider because it sets that destination and builds confidence in what’s possible. The dreams and ambitions expressed in a vision statement energize and motivate everyone in an organization, especially the board. Vision is especially important to effective governance because it focuses on community impact, “the bottom line for nonprofits,” says **Michael Kumer**, principal of BoardsMTO (Made to Order). “That cuts to the heart of every decision the board makes.” But vision can be challenging to articulate, and vision statements sometimes miss the point. “Nonprofit boards typically think about the organization — money, programs, facility — before they think about the audience,” Kumer says. They are conditioned to focus on internal issues and short-term thinking instead of the external community and long-term dreams. It’s no accident that many vision statements present a glowing picture of the *organization* of the future — accessible, fiscally sound, welcoming to diverse audiences, offering a range of excellent programs, and nurturing students’ arts learning potential — instead of the *community* of the future, changed for the better because the organization fulfills its mission.

The National Guild’s values and vision statement shows how vision can imagine the landscape an organization aspires to create:

*We believe involvement in the arts is essential to individual fulfillment and community life. We envision a nation where all Americans understand and appreciate the value of the arts in their lives and in the lives of their communities.*

The vision statement of the Chicago High School for the Arts is both internal and external, addressing student and organizational impact:

#### *For Our Students*

*ChiArts will instill in our students a sense of professionalism, as well as respect for their colleagues, their field, and for society as a whole. Our students will be critical, independent thinkers and good citizens. They will be motivated to apply their scholastic and artistic efforts to enlighten and improve the well being of society. The School recognizes that our students face a rigorous schedule in which equal dedication to work in the arts and academics is vital. Students will meet these high standards and are given the encouragement to succeed.*

#### *For The School*

*ChiArts will provide an open and supportive environment in which young artists can grow and develop. The school will contribute to the artistic reputation of the city of Chicago, fulfilling its mission to educate and train the next generation of artists, and to provide mentors and role models for our students.*

Organizations typically revisit mission, values, and vision with their boards during a strategic planning process. Planning is often mission-driven: What is our current situation, including our strengths and weaknesses? What are our goals for the near future? Set in the present and looking forward, this planning style tends to emphasize problem solving and goal setting. Another option is to use vision as the starting point and work backward: What impact do we want to have on our community? What conditions will help us bring about this change? The National Guild took a vision-centered approach when it launched a planning process this year with a board-staff workshop, which generated possible “destinations” for the planning task force and board to consider. Executive director Jonathan Herman explains: “We wanted to ‘think big’ so rather than starting with an analysis of current reality, the first question we asked ourselves was ‘what is the future we are trying to create?’ This question is helping us focus on, and better understand, the positive change we are striving to make in communities across the country. It also is opening up our thinking about how we can achieve the greatest impact.”

Beyond strategic planning, how can a community arts education organization engage its board in vision as a consistent part of governance? We asked three National Guild trustees who are executive directors of member organizations to reflect on this question. **José Ochoa**, executive and artistic director of the **Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts)** leads a new organization with a founding board. **Helen Eaton** of **Settlement Music School** and **Matthew Braun** of **Fleisher Art Memorial**, both in Philadelphia, are executive directors of century-old organizations.

### CREATING VISION WITH A FOUNDING BOARD

Engagement in vision will come naturally to a founding board that builds an organization from the ground up. At the Chicago High School for the Arts, which welcomed its first ninth-grade class in September 2009, the board is “highly in tune with our vision because they created it,” says José Ochoa. In 2004 two local foundations convened a working group of arts and education organization representatives to explore solutions to the lack of diversity in the city’s professional arts groups. Concerned that young artists lacked superior training at the high-school level — a critical stage in their professional development — the group recommended the formation of an arts high school. An executive committee of civic leaders studied models in other cities, developed a plan, and guided the project through the application process with Chicago Public Schools. That committee became ChiArts’ founding board.

These influential leaders are dedicated to changing the face of the arts in Chicago, and their professional backgrounds and personal connections give them a deep understanding of what the vision demands. “To have a board so engaged and driven is extraordinary. No one is off-agenda or doing their own thing. Everyone wants to be part of this exciting project.” While Ochoa says that board meetings usually follow a predictable agenda, he describes the active culture of inquiry in the boardroom. The atmosphere is conducive to questions and give-and-take. “We don’t have people who just show up and don’t contribute,” he says. Board members often join Ochoa on school tours, so they can experience what’s happening there. “By seeing firsthand what we’re doing, they know we’re on track with our mission and vision.”

As new members gradually join the ChiArts board, they may not have the same ingrained ownership for the vision that comes from the intense, shared experience of creating something new. Instead, they will bring a mix of perspectives on how to make vision a reality. Commitment to mission, values, and vision is a high priority in board recruitment, which currently also focuses on adding professional expertise to the board that will supplement the small staff's capabilities. The same open board culture and direct experiences that benefit founding board members will be especially crucial to new members' engagement with the school.

## RESHAPING VISION OVER TIME

Established organizations like Fleisher Art Memorial and Settlement Music School periodically revisit mission, values, and vision, led by the board in partnership with the staff and sometimes in consultation with community members and stakeholders. Mission and values tend to be enduring statements, but vision is so closely connected to community impact that it needs to evolve and refresh over time. Fleisher's board and staff reassessed and rearticulated the organization's mission, values, and vision as part of a planning process three years ago. Executive director Matthew Braun explains that they sought to create a vision and values that "everyone can believe" as they reflected on what people love about the 114-year-old community arts center and considered the traits that they want to foster "deeply and forever." Executive director Helen Eaton sees the evolving vision of Settlement, founded in 1908, as the guide for a second century of respected service to the community. The fundamental vision isn't likely to change, but the board and staff are seeing new ways to achieve it. "We're working in the 21st century, with new ways to reach and engage with audiences. For me the interesting question is how you honor the vision through any changes that you might make in the organization."

People are attracted to both of these boards because of they believe deeply in the values and vision. "The bottom line is their dedication to the change we want to bring about," says Braun. In addition to actively cultivating and recruiting board members who feel this connection, established organizations sustain the board's dedication by making sure that board work is meaningful and collaborative. When Eaton joined Settlement in 2010, she conducted extensive information gathering and analysis that deepened both the board's and her own understanding of the vision and values. "You can understand a lot about the vision and values of an institution by studying where resources historically have been allocated," she says, because those decisions reflect external needs and internal priorities. Working with staff and faculty, she produced reports and recommendations to stimulate the board's long-term thinking about how the organization needs to grow. Now vision and community impact are critical to discussions around the comprehensive capitalization plan that the organization is developing for its six branches. It is important for the board to agree not just on Settlement's overall vision, but on the particular role it wants to have in each of these communities.

These established organizations, like the younger ChiArts, involve board members in firsthand experiences. At Settlement, every board meeting features a program highlight, and board members frequently visit classes and attend recitals. "When you find concrete ways to connect them to programs and students, they feel connected to vision," Eaton says. Board members also accompany her to meetings with funders, so they are involved in

sharing important messages about the organization's vision and impact. Braun echoes his colleagues' enthusiasm for this kind of ongoing education, which helps the board make better decisions. Visual reminders of mission, values, and vision are useful, too. Fleisher designed a table tent for board and organization events that links the current values and vision to the founder's aspirations. Some boards make printed copies of these guiding principles available during meetings.

## LIVING THE VISION

The transformative power of creating art has always been fundamental to Fleisher Art Memorial's vision. At their annual retreat, the board and staff collaborated on a project that spoke volumes about engagement in vision. Teaching artist Colleen Stepanic led an improvisational activity to make a community artwork from simple materials. Participants arrived to find their tables piled with outdated brochures, flyers, and other colorful scrap paper. They were invited to shred the paper into any shapes they could imagine. Stepanic assembled the mounds of torn paper into a construction and at the end of the retreat she showed everyone the artwork they had helped to create. It now hangs in the lobby. Instead of simply talking about vision, board members tapped their individual and collective creativity to reveal the artists within themselves. It was a total immersion in Samuel Fleisher's vision for the organization he founded.

## TIPS FOR ENERGIZING THE BOARD AROUND VISION

### 1. Make board work meaningful.

Michael Kumer suggests turning board meetings into workshops. Devote the first hour to business and the second hour to broader issues related to the organization, its community, and nonprofit board service. Introduce tangible, vision-related experiences into every meeting and retreat. Make sure board members have individual opportunities for visiting and interacting with students. Give each committee — the place where full engagement happens — has a "stretch" project that relates to vision.

### 2. Articulate a vision message.

Take time to help board members craft and practice "elevator speeches" that explain the organization's mission, values, and vision in succinct terms. Kumer recommends posing these questions: Why do we exist? Why should our community value what we do? Why would people in our community feel a great sense of loss without us?

### 3. Remind the board of the wider context for your vision.

Share the Guild's mission, values, and vision [www.nationalguild.org/About/Who-We-Are.aspx](http://www.nationalguild.org/About/Who-We-Are.aspx) with your board. Invite board members to the Guild's conference, [www.communityartsed.org](http://www.communityartsed.org), and keep them informed about the field.

Kay Sprinkel Grace, Amy McClellan, and John A. Yankey. "Developing and Expressing Mission." *The Nonprofit Board's Role in Mission, Planning, and Evaluation* (BoardSource, 2003).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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