

Administrative lessons from 28 years as a garden director

Peter White, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, September 2016

Being 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 years of experience. Your first thought might be that you deserve respect and that your authority is to be honored. I found that the real issue was that my acceptance and respect was actually based on how I treated others. 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 to 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 the other stars). Even if you had stars at every position, they still need a coach to get them coordinated. So you have to field the best with the team you can, putting 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

As a friend said of the extreme case, liars need to remember which story they told and to whom they told it, 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 a week's duration at the most.

Create positive value, not just response to despair and darkness

Resist the temptation to talk about the 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. Whereas 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. There is no way to avoid this—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. It is like the first time I walked into the living room to see my 6 year old daughter and 4 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 fund raiser without knowing when it would pay for itself. We built and opened a building when we didn't have all the budget or staff we needed. 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, that donors and board were getting restless about the project ever starting. We crossed the 85% threshold of funding, with some possibilities still lurking, so I used an analogy from Texas hold 'em poker and announced at a board meeting 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 as I thought at the time. But you don't know all this when you are faced with the darkness. As you consider “moving all in”, spread the responsibility or, at least, the understanding, by including staff and board in the discussion.

Keep focused on the end point and play for victory

There were several times when we failed. 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 2 years to explore common ground. We raised money and improved an intersection, put in a new bike corridor and ended up with a unanimous vote to by the town council 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 methodical persistence. 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. I managed to keep them on the lectern, but somehow had gotten them rearranged. As I finished one page and turned to the next, it turned out to be one I had already given early. However, 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 flare. And when you 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 force of your emphasis and make you sound cranky and that you blame 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, the more support will come your way. As we entered construction, one board member put all his faith in a sign that would tell what we were up to and money would flow in. It is great to be wonderful, of course, and the sign was good thing to do, but you have to ask others to dance, rather than wait on the sidelines. The wallflower version of fund raising doesn't work.

Give yourself if you want others to give

Asking for money is a whole lot easier if you yourself have given. The number of 0s doesn't matter—everyone has a different range and all 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, facts and spirit. Appeal to the whole human being and invite staff, board, volunteers, and participants 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

There are priorities, 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 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 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., we divided into four teams and fanned out across the country on field trips when we were planning a building to see other buildings—every staff member went on at least one trip). Thinking and decisions, 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 resilient and diverse set of ideas.

Meetings

Be prepared for meetings, have a script, explore possible reactions, talk out and test your ideas in advance. Practice out loud, even if it is in your empty office or a patch of woods on the nature trails. 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.

Recognize folks below you in the power structure every day

It occurs to you that you should focus on the long-term and big objectives—those under you have daily and weekly successes. Notice! Appreciate that work! From lower on the organization chart, meanings and emphasis are different BUT every bit as valid. Bigger scale and longer-term success emerges from smaller scale and shorter-term success. The true purpose of the organization is more likely to occur and be exhibited at those smaller and shorter scales.

Problems happen, but they are a chance to be a hero

At low points, remember how you've been given an opportunity—that someday in the future you will be remembered as the person who solved that problem. What a sigh of relief and satisfaction is lurking in that problem! The heart of the problem also contains a potential hero.

It's a flowing river

Change is a beast, but put out a bowl of food for it.

You can't fix everything for all time: it's like a baton

You won't be director forever and what you want to do is to position your institution so that you can hand it off to the next leadership like a baton in a relay race. You can never fix everything and the decades 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 are just part of being director

Classic board-staff conflicts

The staff thinks that the Board doesn't see the everyday real world characterized by 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 and, further, they think the staff is resistant to change, can't see the forest for the trees, ignores 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 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). The staff is in danger of growing anxious about, loathing, or avoiding each coming board meeting. The structure inevitably creates the potential for these feelings and situations and that can go as badly as you let them to go. The director has to hold everyone's hands through this situation. Mixing folks in planning groups is a step to dissolving the barriers of role like staff and board.

A fellow director's first week on the job

A fellow director told me the story that his first week as director started with his 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. They all had issues and 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 there wouldn't be time to feed all the baby birds in the nest in any typical week. He was turning rapidly from one brush fire to another, unable to put any of them out and feeling that the week simply did not have enough time. 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 into a bitter, self-centered person, no matter how justified. Just change the conversation (see above). It doesn't matter anyway. The world will little note, nor long remember these squabbles. When you retire, your good deeds will be noted!

Tolerating slow resolution

I know a joke that I will resist telling because even I think it is groan-producing—it involves a spittoon in a bar, so let's leave it there (but be assured there is nothing discriminatory or off-color about the joke). But the point of the joke is that some difficult and troubling issues that are all or a piece and can't be divided into separate pieces or pushed faster. Though you know that the issue will sometime come to an end, you just have to let the process unfold (even if you can guess the conclusion). To maintain sanity, you need to discover how to drive along peacefully and stop for the view on occasion.

Baby birds, worms, and a printing press of money

There are many baby birds in the nest and the worm supply can't keep up. Everyone expects you to have a printing press of money in the basement. I often wanted to retreat to that basement! It is a general rule that the number of ideas increases faster than the budget. Even the number of good ideas increases faster than the budget. This, too, is part of the territory of being director.

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 of 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 you can always do more—but having been on the 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 4 speeding tickets and 3 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 for visibility to those with color blindness and require instructors to go through this review. Some 150-200 people are in the

audience. There will always be a few colorblind people in that group and they will complain and ask for their money back, if they cannot interpret the slides. Similarly, one must supervise for all types of people—ranging from highly sensitive to very thick skinned.

Predictability of reward and pain

A lab experiment showed that lab animals exposed to the same amount of pain (an electric shock that was administered) and reward (food) varied in their number of ulcers and the incidence of high blood pressure. Those in charge of the 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 total amount of food and electrical shocks. Administrators are in charge of the decision—and can afford to contemplate; those not in charge get ulcers. You have to be sensitive to this.

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 ok among peers become inappropriate when there is a supervisor-supervisee relationship. A peer would not consider a communication as harsh when a supervisee would consider the same communication as harsh.

A closing statement

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 joined to their name! If you are welcoming a crowd or introducing a speaker and there are other directors in the audience, welcome them by name!