

LEARNING LAB SPOTLIGHT:

Against the Grain Theatre's journey towards intentional governance design

In 2021, the Reimagining Governance project embarked on collaborative, co-creative journeys with eight different nonprofit organizations in a series of "Learning Labs".

In the Learning Labs, board and staff members from each organization committed time and energy over the course of several months to engage in experimentation and dialogue, utilizing tools and resources created by Reimagining Governance. Each organization entered this work with their own unique circumstances and motivations, which shaped each of their journeys in distinct ways.

ORGANIZATION:

Against the Grain
Theatre (AtG)

KEY DETAILS:

- Canadian experimental opera company committed to revitalizing the operatic form to diverse audiences.
- Moving towards national scope and recently became an all-virtual team.
- 3 full-time staff, with the board of directors transitioning out of an operational role.



AT A GLANCE: THEIR BIG "AHA!" MOMENTS

- Recognized the need to be more intentional in how governance is done, particularly in how [governance culture](#) impacts the work.
- Re-thought the kinds of skills, experiences, and knowledge that are critical for governance and how decision-making is informed.
- Began to understand governance as a complex ecosystem that is more than just the board.



I think it's often that arts organizations get kind of stuck in very traditional governance structures and traditional organizational structures and then there's inevitably a clash with [the] artistic spirit. It's important, I think, for a company like AtG, that's incredibly creative and innovative and really tries to do things in a way that's out of the box ... to also [explore] the organizational structure, and governance as a part of that.

- Ilona Dougherty (she/her)

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VIDEO

[Transcript](#)

Robin Whiffen (she/her) and Ilona Dougherty (she/her) from AtG talk about the value of naming unspoken governance dynamics, addressing legacy habits and norms, and how stronger intentionality strengthens governance decision-making.



THEIR JOURNEY

During the Learning Labs, each organization took a different journey depending on their motivations and unique circumstances. Teams followed the energy, and were guided by various resources, activities, and conversations.



MOTIVATIONS FOR REIMAGINING GOVERNANCE

- Desire to examine the assumptions or habits that shape governance and haven't been named.
- Recognition that arts organizations tend to be very innovative, but can lag in terms of their governance innovation.
- Acknowledgement that exponential change and growth in the organization over the last few years has made it critical to evolve and align governance to it.



HOW THEY STARTED

- Created a snapshot of the [unique organizational circumstances](#) that shaped their governance, learning that there's lots of opportunity for innovation.
- Reflected upon the role of governance in their organization, and how broader trends and forces impacted their governance design.

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- Accessed the Reimagining Governance resource [Board essentials](#), which describes the responsibilities the board must fulfill to meet legal and regulatory requirements. It's not all the board may do, but it's the essential ones that can't be shared or delegated.



WHAT THEY LEARNED AND UNCOVERED

Through their preliminary conversations, the group reflected that:

- Some long-standing habits and assumptions about governance should be challenged.
- The organization and its governance tended to be more reactive than proactive.
- As an arts organization, there was a unique reality balancing an artistic *and* operational vision that doesn't always align.



This led to the emergence of a core aspiration for AtG, which was to strengthen the intentionality of their governance system.

To get clear on what this aspiration meant, the group did some brainstorming on what governance could look like if it were free from all existing ways of doing things.

They brainstormed:

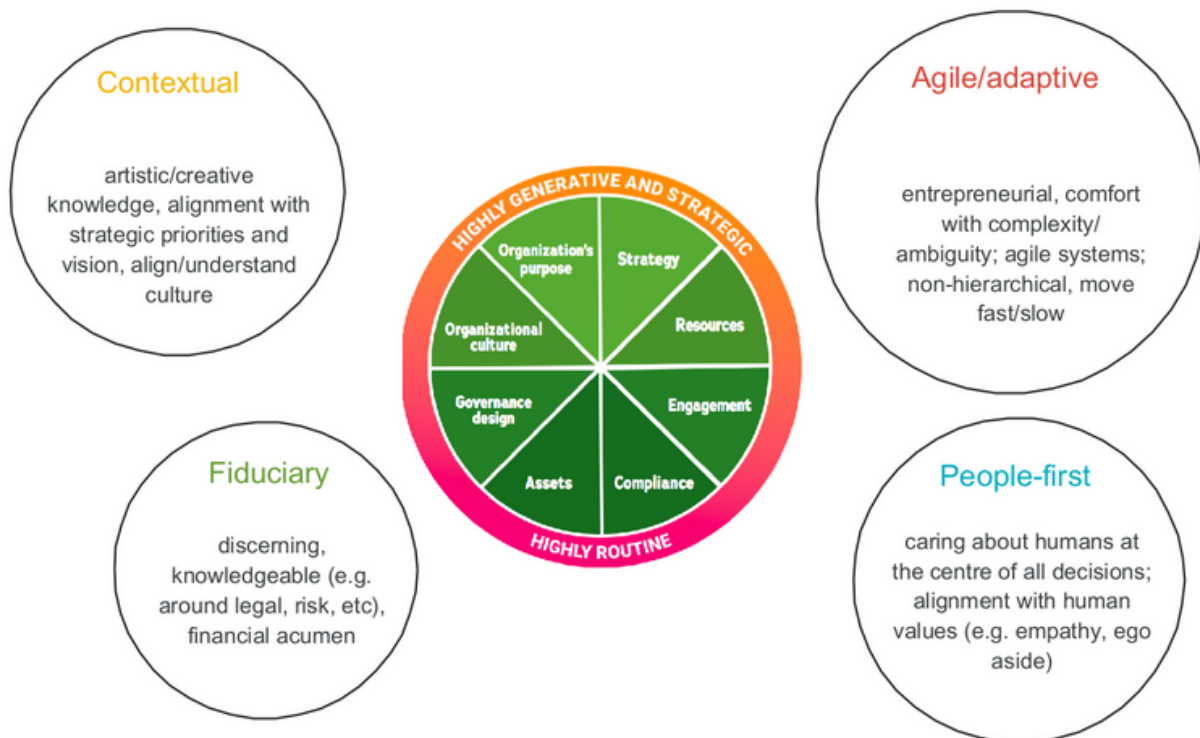
- The characteristics (*skills, experiences, mindsets, etc.*) they would seek in governance leaders, all driven by the kinds of governance work that needed to be done.
- What "success" would look and feel like if they did governance differently.

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🔍 HOW THEY DUG DEEPER

As they dug into the governance leadership characteristics, the group identified four broad theme areas that they felt were critical to fulfilling governance work at AtG: contextual, agile/adaptive, fiduciary, and people-first.



The group discussed the existing governance structure, which included an Artistic Director, Executive Director, the board, and a collective of artists. They considered the various governance functions, and who could be doing them and how. This shed light on the different roles and responsibilities of governance, which had been confusing. It also affirmed a number of shared values amongst AtG's current team.

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This conversation started a deeper dialogue about how the board composition and recruitment might shift. They recognized that as an arts organization, it was important to engage artists and creatives in governance work, but the board wasn't always the best mechanism. They acknowledged that the board is one - and not the only - place to engage with the wide and diverse community that AtG serves.



In the not-for-profit sector there's often this sense that the board are these all-knowing beings and the staff do other stuff... we're separate, we have different jobs, we shouldn't interact. I don't think [this] makes any sense at all.

- Ilona Dougherty

As a way to dig deeper into the critical success factors for their governance, the group asked themselves:



- What governance decisions are critical for the board to make? The Executive Director? The Artistic Director? Others?
- What would a successful governance culture look and feel like?
- In an ideal world, how are governance decisions made? Who's included?
- Where could governance work happen outside of the traditional board and staff leadership realms?



We recognized that a lot of our decision making and a lot of the culture that existed was really driven by personal relationships, and by personalities and less from an articulated place.

- Robin Whiffen

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Some examples of the success factors that emerged are:

- Having an intentional, values-driven culture that is articulated in a lasting but iterative way.
- Experiencing symbiosis between the board, executive, and artists.
- Governance work being shared outside of the board and staff leadership, but with very clear role delineation and accountabilities.

All of this work began to clarify what an intentional, values-driven governance culture would look like for AtG and how it connected to the organization's broader strategic work.



WHAT THEY'RE DOING NOW

AtG is continuing to host these conversations and remain open to emergence in their reimagining of governance.

Some steps that they're taking include:

- Revising their organizational values and translating them into values specific to governance.
- Creating a multi-layered skills matrix to include the characteristics that are desirable in governance leaders, including the board and others doing governance work.
- Applying the values and new skills matrix when filling their board vacancies, and looking for ways to engage people in decision-making beyond the board.

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VIDEO

[Transcript](#)

Robin and Ilona share some words of wisdom for folks who are thinking about starting their own reimagining governance journey.



Arts organizations can often feel an [incredible tension](#) between their creative spirit, and the expectations of traditional governance. As the organization continues to evolve its role and think about its identity moving forward, Robin notes that they'll focus on being less reactionary and more strategic.



START YOUR OWN REIMAGINING JOURNEY!

Explore some **foundational tools** that help create the governance building blocks to innovations, and access the **Create a more intentional governance culture** tool in the Reimagining Governance Lab to get a more detailed outline of the process and try it yourself!

[VISIT THE LAB](#) >

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