

**Claire Hodgson - Joint Artistic Director, Diverse City**

**I'm going to talk about how to find and keep trustees.**

I felt a bit nervous this week because I thought, "gosh, have we lost any trustees?!" but we haven't so that's what I'm going to focus on.

I set up Diverse City twelve years ago. I actually set it up after a year at The School for Social Entrepreneurs. I now share the leadership of the company with Jamie Beddard who is Co-Artistic Director with me and Becky Chapman who is the Executive Director. When I set the company up twelve years ago we had a tiny office in Old Street and it was really just me. Today the company's based in the South West, we work nationally and internationally and we're a remote-working company with no office. We employ twelve people who are based across Dorset, Bristol, London and Brighton. We're committed to a shared and distributed leadership model and task-based flexible working that allows more people with caring responsibilities, disabilities and other barriers to fully contribute to the workplace.

We work in the performing arts and we are about creating equality in the performing arts. That's what we do. We make shows. I'm an artist, so is Jamie, so are many others in our company. We try to create equality by showing the world that we could live in through our shows. We also do training and we work a lot in communities.

Since sharing the leadership of the company surprisingly, and slightly annoyingly, the company's become a lot more successful and we've moved from a few employees to many more; but what I want to focus on today is about what happened when we diversified our board. What has happened since diversifying our board is that we quadrupled our turnover and it's a really interesting story. We did it because we needed new governance. We needed to move from being a company limited by guarantee to being a charity fairly quickly and effectively. We needed to move from having three directors to having around nine trustees. The move was because we wanted to become a National Portfolio Organisation in the arts which is the 600 organisations that the Arts Council gives core funding to. We didn't have governance that was fit to undertake the amount of money we wanted. We wanted to go in for the first time at band two which means we would receive perhaps around half a million pounds a year. It had taken us quite a long time to ask for the money - almost twelve years - so we thought we had better go in fairly big.

The thing I always think is that I'm really aware it's public money we receive through the Arts Council. I always think when I am in the newsagents about the people buying lottery tickets, because our money actually comes from the lottery, that's where our NPO money comes from. I think "are we really serving properly the people who are buying their lottery tickets ahead of me?".

What I really wanted us to do through our board was properly understand all the different perspectives of Britishness now, and to make sure that the money is

reaching all the people that are contributing towards it. This has meant recruiting people who are not currently trustees, have never been trustees, and looking for talent. The way we approached it was exactly as we would if we were casting a show which is that we knew what we were looking for, we began to delve into networks to find it, we asked people for leads and we talked to lots of people we don't know. Which is exactly what we do when we are looking for new actors and performers.

**Many talented people are not trustees because governance has not been and isn't representative. I would like to remind people that a board can be really efficient and effective if people on it have no previous experience of governance.** Amna who is on our board currently said to me that she had never been asked to be a trustee before. Amna is a community psychologist and has a major leadership position in a charity. She is also a British Muslim woman. She said "find people who you think can be brilliant but perhaps don't really know what being part of a board is like, or what benefit they might get as well as give to an organisation". As I found out, it's a very white, middle-class thing to do to join boards of organisations because it's simply not expected from any other demographic. So that's Amna sending her advice to us.

Ayad is on our board and we met him on a project we undertook in Stoke. Ayad when we first met him had recently arrived from Iraq in really difficult circumstances. He didn't know whether he and his parents would be able to stay. Ayad is one of our Unexpected Leaders which is a network of leaders that we've worked to create around the country of people who are not expected to be leaders but obviously have loads of potential and *are* clearly leaders. Ayad's previous life in Iraq was around, remarkably, health and safety. Since we produce large scale circus shows with loads of community cast in them and loads of young people with disabilities flying through the air, it's been a perfect match.

Dave who is also one of our trustees is twenty-four. Dave is a young disabled artist and he's been working with us for twelve years. He's come through our youth theatre and now is an independent artist. It makes sense that he becomes a trustee as he's been a direct beneficiary.

I thought about my own journey. I was never asked to be a trustee until I was forty which is really interesting because I'd been working for twenty years. It's a big shame as since I turned forty, which now is a while ago, I've had much less capacity. If people had asked me in my twenties and thirties I would have had loads more time. Now it's really difficult for me to be a trustee and be on boards.

My current barrier to participating in governance, as I'm sure is the same for many other people, is that there are evening meetings in London and I live in Dorset and have a nine year old daughter. I personally would be able to stay on boards if they met on Saturday mornings in various locations across the country, and had a kids craft club attached. I'm not joking because actually the way we've done things means that lots of people simply can't participate in governance. I would say the

same about town council meetings and many other examples of civic life. We've just got to change how we do it.

As a company we've worked over the past nine years to make sure that people who face barriers really can have effective and productive work lives. I think now we're beginning to turn that same lens on governance. In terms of our board, day sessions are better attended than evening ones. If we offer to book people's travel and support logistics, that helps a lot. We offer people the opportunity to Skype or Zoom in and we have to be very rigorous and stick to our agenda. Dave, who I spoke about earlier, uses eye gaze technology to pre-programme his speech so he needs to pre-programme all his interventions. He is like the "arts Stephen Hawking" I always think. So we need to be absolutely on the ball to be able to work with Dave because it takes him hours and hours to programme what he wants to say at a board meeting. That gives a real perspective for me and respect about speaking and being heard.

I spoke with some of our trustees and reflected about my own experience on boards. In terms of keeping trustees I've stayed on boards when I felt my expertise was being used. I've felt frustrated in the past when there was no clear way I could contribute, or that I could have been anyone and nobody was using what I knew about in particular.

Shaista Aziz [Diverse City trustee] talked to me yesterday about the importance of being able to bring creativity, ideas and life experience to the table and that that contribution was actually listened to and then acted upon. She said it's very important to have the opportunity to contribute expertise, the opportunity to work in small groups on specific time-based tasks and to Skype in. She wanted us to remember that not all the talented people live in London.

My three tips to making governance and a board fully representative, simply to represent the population as it actually exists in terms of disabled people, people from different ethnic backgrounds, in terms of class and age and sexuality, and all the other characteristics:

- 1. Remove the barriers to participation.** Lots of these are really practical and logistical support around issues that stop people engaging with governance. That's childcare expenses, travel expenses, booking of travel for people and always using accessible spaces at times that work for people.
- 2. Question the way things have been done.** Who invented how boards work and who do these ways of doing things serve? Which is exactly the Audre Lorde quote about masters ["For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house..."]. If you want to do things differently, you've got to do them really differently.

I would really caution when people say these sentences: "we need someone with experience", "we can't take a risk with this post". I've heard those a lot in

my career. It usually means that people want someone who looks like the people who are already there.

I hate the word 'experience' because when I was younger in my career, when someone said "this would be a good experience for you", it usually meant it was a nightmare coming towards me that I would have to sort out. As I've got older, when people say we need someone with experience, it means I want someone I feel comfortable with. I just think we're cloaking lots of things behind those words.

- 3. We need to move into new networks where we know no one.** We need to make ourselves uncomfortable and we need to find people who are nothing like ourselves.

**I think diversity for me is both uncomfortable and sublime.** I think what diversity is about is being challenged by people who are different to you and that in the end is thrilling. It's cognitive diversity that we need and more of that in our world, at this moment, would have led us to really different places. And I'm sure like me, we simply do not have the most talented people running the show at any level, in any place, at the moment, and we've got to do something about it.

Thank you.

**Claire Hodgson**, Diverse City <http://www.diversecity.org.uk/>