

Discovery Report for Recess
Board Design for Care and Accountability
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Process Overview

This Discovery Report is intended to inform and to assist the Recess Advisory Circle in its reimagining of a board structure and culture that underscores and extends Recess's Framework for Care and Accountability toward Abolition (Appendix D.)

Our findings and recommendations incorporate the following:

- Kickoff meeting and recommendations for interviews gathered from Advisory Circle and Co-Directors
- Aggregate findings from eight 1:1 interviews, one interview with two people affiliated with the same organization, and one interview conducted by both consultants for a total of 11 people interviewed. Interviewees represent nonprofit and philanthropic leadership familiar with changing board and staff to redistribute power. All the interviewees work, or have worked in culture and art. Many are experienced organizing around abolition. Several have fieldwide knowledge of national and local art organizations, especially those led and serving people of color, that have undergone or are working towards new models of leadership
- Given the exploratory nature of the process, the varied experiments developing across fields, and our focus on operationalization, the interviewees generously shared varied resources connecting with and stirred by their thinking around power redistribution (Appendix C.)

We conducted the interviews using the questionnaire in Appendix A, but the conversations were semi-structured. The consultant conducting the interview was free to diverge from the script when they were led in an important or interesting direction by the interviewee. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

All sources of data were reviewed by both Sunanda Ghosh and Amy Sadao, who collaborated on the analysis and recommendations shared here.

Consultant Recommendations

Underneath successful leadership composition and recruitment are strong shared organizational values. Like Recess's Care and Accountability Framework and four core values, a values statement creates a road map for staff and board to move the work forward together. It enables prospective board members to understand the organization's priorities and process. Before board recruitment, we recommend all organizations revisit and confirm clear values statements with staff and define the communities the organization prioritizes, both present and aspirational.

- An essential quality for a Recess board member might be a willingness to engage one's own relationship to privilege and power, and the willingness and curiosity to process this with each other.
- Recruit board members who are willing to undertake continued political and cultural education. Recognize each potential members' experience and learning trajectory.
- Great value is placed on the integration of staff and board. A board committed to shifting power respects that the staff are the experts in the operations of the organization and works to support them both in their current roles as well as in their career evolution beyond Recess. Universal access to coaching is among the professional development one organizations offers employees.
- Clarity and transparency on board roles and responsibilities are important. Organization leadership can create job descriptions for board members.
- Board leadership can have two co-chairs sharing the responsibility while working with Recess leadership to manage the board.
- Hierarchy has pros and cons. Pay scale can be equated with carrying more responsibility for the organization. Leaders hold challenges, for example how to maintain feedback opportunities for staff and how to integrate staff input into processes and programs.
- Investigate the role of philanthropy on and through Recess' board. Work towards learning around reparative philanthropy. What perspective can philanthropists offer the board? How can Recess offer major donors learning opportunities? For example, can Recess consider a "reverse structure" of a governing board vs. advisory board. Artists and community members serve on the governing board

and are compensated for their time. Recess can create a separate circle of major donors that have no governing responsibility. A few organizations have experimented with this model. Essentially, donors have an engagement plan with familiar programs, galas, and behind-the-scenes events, but there is an educational component incorporating workshops on reparative philanthropy. Donors learn together to deepen their role in the organization, and their philanthropic relationship with community-centered organizations at large.

- Using an outside evaluator to review the evolution of the board and its progress could be useful to Recess as well as the arts sector. Alternatively, Recess can develop a simple matrix of goals and give time to regularly “grade” itself.
- To support an evolving board culture, we recommend exploring revenue generating opportunities so the organization is not dependent on the board to raise funds. For example, could Recess develop a consulting arm conducting workshops and trainings?

Analysis of Interviews and Major Themes

This is new territory. Almost all of the interviewees reflected on concerns about traditional board leadership, the dependence on board giving that privileges wealthy members, and many perceived limitations of 501(c)3 structures. They shared a level of frustration with the lack of progress in changing who serves on board and how boards function to support organizations, but acknowledged this process is evolving. Several expressed the hope that Recess will document and share its process.

1. Board Composition

Board relations are all interpersonal. Board members need to be willing to process their roles together and to embrace learning as a group. How can the board be a space of radical intimacy? If this is an underlying principle, it may help create a board of shared values and imagination.

Quotes

“We’ve tended to organize board culture, board duties, board responsibilities, all around dollars. And what would it look like if we privileged ethics and aesthetics? And then within that understood economics as a subset of them. I think we would organize board meetings differently, and I think we would organize how we select boards differently.”

“Job descriptions for board members tend to be: “Don’t be an ax murderer and give us some money and we’ll put you on the board.”...not all board members should have to be

identical. If I had a 12 person board, I would want 12 individual job descriptions that say you are on the board to do X, Y, and Z.”

Ideas

- Shift specific professional expertise work like marketing, HR, or legal advice away from board composition priorities and to consultants
- Invest in finding the right board members. A board interview process could be similar to interviewing for a job. Reference check board nominees
- Build the board through a mix of open call and recruitment
- A Board Tool Box could include: individual job descriptions, quarterly goals specific to each board member, talking points about how to share about their specific place in the organization to the outside world, and an explanation of staff roles. This could be developed by the board and staff collectively
- Rethink board involvement and how meetings run with an understanding of the different availability of younger, working, and/or caregiving members
- Offer board compensation. For reference, A Blade of Grass, a funding organization, used a compensation consultant to help decide on a \$15,000 stipend to each artist board member, equivalent to an adjunct salary.
- Find a lawyer who can imagine a new governing structure as a 501(c)3

2. Dynamics of leadership

Abolition values are reflected in governance. Sharing power is a process of unlearning. Many of us, especially among people of color, have been divested of leadership roles and skills. We need to support one another to step into roles of decision-making, share dissenting opinions, not shy away from conflict, and register consent. How does power shifting look different for POC organizations? What is the impact of white leaders stepping down and away from organizations leaving POC to implement horizontality or a new way of working with board and staff?

Quotes

“I think all this work that we're doing around trying to change these systems and structures ever so slowly is seeding the landscape and the ecosystem to come after us.”

“We're all unlearning hierarchy, and we know that hierarchical thinking is a symptom of carceral systems in so many ways.”

Ideas

- It's useful to consider the importance of hierarchy from the standpoint of care. Staff is compensated for the amount of work they carry for the organization. Those who have more pay, and more decision making ability, take on more

responsibilities. One interviewee referenced Cyndi Suarez, “Whether it is done consciously or unconsciously, the typical interaction between a dominant and a subordinate is one where the dominant offloads anxiety and the subordinate uploads that anxiety.”

- Hierarchy can be situational. This may be clarified by processes like the [RACI matrix](#) (who is responsible, accountable, consulted, informed). Staff can create RACI models to share with leadership and board.
- Reconsidering board committee structure can help integrate board and staff. Two examples cited were 1.) a Mission Circle and a General (operations) Circle that both include staff, and 2.) an organization that creates synergy between board and staff while addressing the conflict of board-directed programming with three board committees. At Internal (protocols, procedures), External (communications, fundraising) and Executive quarterly meetings the staff join and also introduce programming.
- A potential hierarchy map cited illustrates how the CEO learns from staff - who know the field - creates the strategy - and stewards board understanding and support

3. Fundraising

Every interviewee was concerned about the perceived necessity of linking wealth and access to wealth to board leadership eligibility. There were dissenting opinions on the necessity of board give/get levels as well as the importance of balancing individual (often board connected) and institutional funding.

Quote

“There is nothing, my understanding of everything about how nonprofits exist in this country, there is nothing that says your board has to be your major donors. That's something we've done because in many ways those are the folks we want to keep closest. And if we keep our boards closest, we've done that. But particularly with non-white institutions, the boards are oftentimes not a significant percentage of giving. Most of those cases, the board gives a hundred percent and they give a hundred percent at a level that's meaningful to them, and that is still not even a double digit percentage of the organization's budget. So there are lots of models where your board members and your donors are not a hundred percent overlap”

Ideas

- If there has been an overinvestment in financial judgements on boards, what is the right relationship between finance evaluations and aesthetic and ethical ones?

- Create a Major Donor Circle with non-governing duties. Develop a clear case for the importance this circle holds and recruit donors to co-chair the circle.
- Some organizations are embracing B corp and profit development to generate new revenue streams

Appendix A

Interviews

Jamie Bennett, Thought Leader, Lord Cultural Resources

Gonzalo Casals, Senior Research for Arts and Culture Fellow, Mellon Foundation
(former Director, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, former Commissioner for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs)

Yanira Castro & Laurel Lawson, Board Member and community partner for Dance/NYC

Michelle Coffey, Director, Lambent Foundation

Heather Hart, Co-founder, Black Lunch Table

Deborah Fisher, former Director, A Blade of Grass

Liz Kennedy, Co-director of Operations, Care Based Safety

Judilee Reed, Director, CEO, United States Artists (former Program Director of Creative Communities , William Penn Foundation)

Megan Steinman, Executive Director, Denniston Hill (former Director, Underground Museum)

Ayesha Williams, Executive Director, Laundromat Project

Appendix B

Interview Questionnaire

1. Tell me about your experience with organizations that have worked on power shifting, or redistributing power internally?
2. Can you describe how this was operationalized?
3. What did you learn?
4. What would you recommend to know about this process? And what would you caution Recess to avoid or to stay aware of?
5. Are there other organizations working on shifting power? Who is at different phases of the work?
6. What else do you hope to see evolve as organizations reorganize power in staff and board?
7. (time permitting) Can you offer a concise statement on the philosophy that is dictating these choices, even beyond your direct experience?

Appendix C

Resources Shared

[A.R.T. New York, Alliance of Resident Theatres](#) has tracked their evolving values over time and shares them publicly

[Bridge Live Arts](#) moved from a founder-led organization through a process of distributed leadership, motivated in part by the challenge to be an anti-racist organization. [Writing](#) on the process from leaders' perspective

Care Based Solutions utilizes [Sociocracy](#) method to develop an organizational structure based not on consensus but on consent that requires everyone in a circle to agree before moving forward. They have engaged a consultant who is stewarding the process and training. Co-director Liz Kennedy relates that they needed to adapt some of the methodology to meet their needs. She shared illustrations of Care Based Solutions [structure](#). She named [NEW](#), Ann Arbor as an organization that has already integrated the Sociocracy methodology

The Laundromat Project [Board Interest Form](#)

[Lawyer](#) used by A Blade of Grass as they transitioned their board to paid artists. Deborah Fisher spoke with many lawyers before she found Megan Bell.

Referenced in an interview, Diane Ragsdale's [blog post](#) on board's valuing aesthetic, economic, and ethical limitation. An excerpt:

Most boards have finance and audit committees and dedicate time at each meeting to understanding the financial position of the organization. Boards are equipped and comfortable setting limits on, e.g. how far over budget or into debt an arts organization may go. They may set targets for reserves or endowment. They may fail to approve a budget that is not balanced and may ask executive leaders to make cuts if income is falling short. They may implement give or get policies and recruit board members with high capacity to contribute to ensure that the organization is able to reach its income targets each year.

On the other hand, how many cultural nonprofits have explicit, sophisticated, depth conversations at the board level in order to understand or come to agreement on the organization's aesthetic values or ethical principles? Even more pointedly, how many organizations hold their feet to the fire by establishing measurable policies to operationalize these. The kinds of policies that might enable or compel board members to ask awkward questions when, for example, the season is announced and there are zero writers or composers of color in the lineup? Or when a pandemic hits and the decision is made to lay off all the

teaching artists but hold onto the majority of marketing and development staff for the time being?

[University of Orange](#), Mindy Thompson Fullilove and others through collective history of organizing in Orange NJ, as an example of ways of being the student and the teacher

[Design Studio for Social Intervention](#), Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine, have led work power mapping in communities and organizations

[Cyndi Suarez - Editor-in-Chief of Nonprofit Quarterly](#), author *The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics*. An excerpt:

Whether it is done consciously or unconsciously, the typical interaction between a dominant and a subordinate is one where the dominant offloads anxiety and the subordinate uploads that anxiety...an affect can be overcome by a contrary, stronger affect. Overcoming another's affect depends on one's ability to focus one's attention. One's attention is the currency with which one purchases the life one wants. The practice of intentionally directing one's affect is supported by the seven classical virtues, which are a spiritual form of liberatory social codes.

The Classical Virtues

Courage	The strength to resist affect
Prudence	The conservation of energy
Temperance	The strength to resist directing negative affect
Justice	Taking and giving what is appropriate
Hope	The belief that the future can be better
Faith	The assumption that one is the focus of a divine, loving intelligence
Love	A unifying energy

Freedom is the ability to be free of negative affects, one's own and those of another. Living freely is refusing to take on another's negative affect. Living responsibly is refusing to project negative affect onto others. Justice is taking no more affect than is appropriate for one's actions and giving the affect that is appropriate for what one receives from another.

Appendix D

Care & Accountability toward Abolition: A Framework at Recess and Beyond

Compiled by Recess staff and board in 2020

Background

*I want to be disoriented. Open some windows for me. Let me see things I cannot imagine — and not spectacle, which is what so much of art has become. I'm really talking about the **depth and pain of evolving a vision that you then make tangible through work...*** -Linda Goode Bryant

Recess formed 11 years ago to build a more equitable arts community. We began by uniting artists and audiences through the creative process, and since our inception, we have constantly upped the ante, pushing ourselves toward greater accountability to our values of equity and justice in the arts. What we are proposing here may seem radical because there is little precedent in arts institutions, but it is grounded in simple principles of ethics and basic human decency that have always been at the core of Recess.

As Recess grew, our programs increasingly trained their focus on systems of oppression, the harder it became to turn away, and the better we understood our role as artists in dismantling these systems. As such, our vision has sharpened, and our strategy for achieving our vision has likewise evolved. This work is researched, rigorous, and informed by warriors that came before us and individuals living out the repercussions of white supremacist structures.

We believe in the human capacity to imagine fundamental change and that artists must lead this process. In the arts, as well as the United States at large, we are witnessing an era marked by extreme inequity, but also by a fertility of imagination. Reimagining a more just and equitable creative community is a prerequisite for building that community. At Recess, we have been working with artists, system-impacted individuals, and community partners to continually foster a holistic effort *across our organization*. By pursuing new models internally (staff, operations, board governance) as well as externally (programs, fundraising, communications) we can realize our mission with integrity and proliferate this ethos of care that constantly strives toward abolition.

Our Work With and Against Systems

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support." -Audre Lorde

Lorde's statement has served to guide our understanding of our work with systems, particularly over the past 4.5 years since the inception of the Assembly program. While

we have engaged the court systems, the police, and other oppressive stakeholders, we have done so as independent practitioners on our own terms and as artists using creative tools to dismantle them and build models antithetical to oppressive structures that grow from fear. This strategy works towards the goal of building partnerships among artists and court involved youth to dissolve these systems of oppression and build alternatives from the ground up.

Over the past year, we have begun to experiment with decarceration and community safety that does *not* engage the systems we hope to dismantle. For instance, we have rolled out a cohort of Assembly with participants referred by our Assembly Peer Leaders instead of by the courts. Our youth offer the program to their peers from a place of care rather than fear. We are building a rubric for youth-led community safety without police that likewise stems from a place of respect, understanding, and trust. We are developing the necessary community partnerships to deliver workshops with and for these caring communities.

We are ready to do the same with internal operations: build structures for equity without relying solely on existing models designed to preserve white supremacy. This methodology implies compensating and caring for staff with the same rigor we use to build programs and provide for program participants. It means supporting the whole person who comes to work, not just an employee with a particular title and function. Our staff is 88% non-white and 55% Black and caring for our staff is central to our ability to achieve our mission with integrity. White, asian and latinex staff members at Recess have committed to a life's work of becoming better allies and coconspirators for their Black colleagues.

Leadership at Recess

Organizing is both science and art. It is thinking through a vision, a strategy, and then figuring out who your targets are, always being concerned about power, always being concerned about how you're going to actually build power in order to be able to push your issues, in order to be able to get the target to actually move in the way that you want to. -Mariame Kaba

...I think all of us human beings have lived some moments of life where we're in something we're not part of. And when you're in it but not of it, you're constantly trying to position who you are without losing that...how creative can I be in reshaping this it? And I may fall flat on my face, but it's that challenge: how can we create space we're of in space we're not of? -Linda Goode Bryant

A core element of reimagining and changing nonprofit operations is revising leadership models. Since our inception, Recess has been guided and led by artists. It is time to recognize that leadership and name it in the same way we have named executive leadership. It is our hope that in turn, our organization can function like an artist collective rather than a corporate entity. In order to do so, we must uplift the work that artists do to lead movements and organizations. We must champion the imagination and creativity of our artists not as a hobby but as a guiding, trailblazing force. This does

not mean we will ask artists to do the work of administrators and fundraisers. We will ask them to do what they have already been doing: reimagine, refine, rebuild.

As such, Recess becomes an engine of revision. We are not a corporation set on best practices in a field where best practices are designed to preserve white supremacy. Instead, artists move through the world by constantly reimagining their surroundings. As an organization we will seek the same by using creative, original thought, informed by a cannon of our own making.

Dual leadership offers space for Black and brown leadership to thrive alongside white accomplices who commit to accountability to equity and divestment of privilege. This allows white leaders to shoulder the burden of dismantling structures of their own making in a way that is guided by BIPOC visionary leadership.

Abolition at Recess

Abolition must be embraced from an intersectional place that acknowledges our implications in systems of oppression at home and at large. We cannot abolish prisons, we cannot abolish police, if we as creative institutions are not willing to relinquish capitalist structures that silence those telling stories about the insidious foundation of our nation. - Recess staff in a joint statement, June 2020

To define abolition, we must first be clear about what we seek to abolish. The system that we seek to abolish is white supremacy as it intersects with capitalist heteropatriarchy. White supremacy is responsible for the carceral state and modern day policing. It is responsible for the dehumanization of huge swaths of people and a fear of the other that puts people in cages and destroys lives.

Recess defines abolition in the manner of Ruth Wilson Gilmore who said, “it’s obvious that the system won’t disappear overnight. No abolitionist thinks that will be the case.” But we believe that the system cannot be fixed by “removing and replacing a few elements.” Gilmore is focused instead on incrementally working toward a vision and engaging a strategy to close jails and dismantle police one facility at a time while simultaneously diverting funding to services and resources that will prevent harm from occurring in communities. She insists that “where life is precious, life is precious.”

Advocacy for the scalability of this model

The Artist is no other than he who unlearns what he has learned, in order to know himself. -James Baldwin

Recess is a small nonprofit. We will not abolish these systems of oppression on our own. That is the impetus for building this framework so that it can be scaled in communities and in other institutions. Partnerships both in and outside of art spaces are key to this approach; both partnerships with organizations who have been doing this work longer than we have, as well as partnerships with organizations and individuals who are new to the fight and open to working within this framework. Currently, the only widely available remedy to racism that is readily available in institutions is anti-bias training or a practice of hiring POC staff. While there is great

value in this training, it is not enough when it is not accompanied by structural shifts in vision and strategy that embrace care in order to prevent harm rather than a rubric of fear which seeks to control individuals. That is why Recess seeks to operate like an artist. We hope to build a framework that functions like a work of art that is accessible to all and can inform any space it occupies. Like art, this *Care and Accountability toward Abolition* framework will be interpreted differently by different communities based on their identity, leadership, skills and needs.

Practical recommendations for an equitable programmatic and internal structure

- Universal starting salary
- Health insurance for all employees including part-time workers
- Program model that provides alternatives to systems without engaging those systems: e.g., community safety without police, alternatives to incarceration without the courts
- Advocacy for community safety and prison abolition
- Intersectional practices such as acknowledging indigenous land and use of gender neutral language and spaces
- Dual leadership model for staff and board that honors both operational and creative visioning
- Advocacy for artistic leadership and creative thinking beyond Recess
- Mental health support for staff, artists, and youth
- Competitive pay for artists and youth
- Paid or non-financial-contributing tier of board members for artists
- Workshop model designed by Shaun Leonardo that can be applied to other institutions to embody this ethos
 - *Affirmation of shared intention*
 - *A practice of listening*
 - *Social and political education*
 - *Collective knowing (curriculum performance and storytelling work)*

These changes are a starting point. Practical equity recommendations serve as a skeletal framework from which we will continue to cultivate a holistic culture of care that permeates all elements of our work at Recess. This culture of care builds toward abolition of the structures that grow from fear.