

# Getting on Board with National Sawdust

As the governing body that makes crucial decisions on behalf of organizations, the board of directors is an essential part to building a strong not-for-profit. Regulated by both federal and state laws, as well as by institutional expectations, boards are held to high standards. Members of a board have fiduciary responsibilities to an organization, charged with maintaining the financial health and advancing the strategic direction of a business. Devoting time, energy, and financial resources to an organization is a given for board trustees. This case examines the inner-workings of the board of directors of National Sawdust, a contemporary music venue, during the organization's infancy. In August 2016, the board determined that one of its chief priorities for the year ahead was expanding its membership from 18 to 25 directors. The study reveals expectations of National Sawdust's board members and issues around recruitment and accountability. As a project consultant, you are charged with assessing National Sawdust's current guidelines of board obligations and suggesting modifications to create a clear and meaningful document, which can aid in the recruitment of potential trustees.

# NATIONAL SAWDUST

This case study was prepared by Blaire Koerner. *The Eastman Case Studies* are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

## The Dream, The Factory, The Venue

National Sawdust officially opened its doors in Brooklyn, New York in October 2015, after seven years of planning and millions spent transforming an early twentieth-century sawdust mill into a concert venue for a new age. The not-for-profit was poised for its inaugural concert season and destined to be more than a performance space. It was billed as a “place for exploration and discovery. A place where emerging and established artists can share their music with serious music fans and casual listeners alike.” National Sawdust not only aspired to be a presenter of musicians, but also aimed to serve as an artist-led incubator for new forms of performance art by commissioning musical works, sponsoring artists in residence, and collaborating with curators.

“New music has never had its own miniature Carnegie Hall, a space explicitly designed for musical experimentation.”

– *New York Magazine*

The idea for National Sawdust was hatched by Kevin Dolan, a tax lawyer who wanted to enrich New York’s contemporary art music scene. An amateur composer and organist himself, Dolan wanted to contribute to the arts by developing a space for creativity. He started by collaborating with architects from Bureau V and engineers from the firm Arup to develop a space that could be molded for various artistic needs. The space needed flexibility to fit the requirements of a wide array of artistic endeavors, with the capacity to record as well. The stage needed to be reconfigurable, with moveable panels on the surrounding walls. Together they envisioned possibilities for different audience arrangements (including options for standing), and, of course, the hall required state-of-the-art audio technology. Dolan also imagined a restaurant and lounge on site, run

by an award-winning chef. He made it clear to the architects that for this dream to work, “the space had to be acoustically strong. Audiences shouldn’t have to subject themselves to discomfort. And there would be good food.”

Establishing a stylish concert venue was just one small step towards developing an institution that could nurture creative performance. To push the vision toward artistic reality, Dolan tapped Paola Prestini—a young composer and graduate of The Juilliard School in New York who had already developed her own arts company—to become the creative director of the project. Together they brainstormed ideas for the venue, designed brand concepts, and discussed raising awareness. From 2009 onward, Dolan and Prestini focused on recruiting a board of directors, which could develop an organizational mission, establish short- and long-term goals, and determine appropriate staff and curators. The duo also concentrated on the critical area of fundraising. Although Dolan was able to contribute \$8 million towards his artistic dream, the architects determined that it would take \$16 million to realize the full extent of the renovation.

To build anticipation and awareness, Prestini arranged multiple performances of contemporary music in unique New York City spaces and collaborated with partners such as the summertime River to River Festival, the living composers’ platform “Q2” of WQXR classical radio in New York, and WQXR’s live venue, The Jerome L. Greene Performance Space. Before the organization was fully operational, and still going by its initial name of Original Music Workshop, the contemporary art music venue garnered feature articles in *The New York Times*, *Time Out New York*, *New York Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Brooklyn Magazine*. Riding the positive press, Dolan and Prestini reached their \$16 million goal in 2015 with help of a crowdfunding campaign, targeted donation campaigns, and