

CASE STUDY

Listening, Helping, Learning: Unifying a Beloved Nature Center



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International™

Blandford Nature Center

Blandford is a well-known nature center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that offers hundreds of acres of well-managed land, nature trails, wildlife habitat, sustainable farming, and environmental education and outdoor experiences for students young and old.

Jason Meyer, Blandford's president and CEO, came to the nature center in 2014, taking the baton from the long-time and founding director, Dr. Mary Jane Dockeray. Building on her strong foundation and supported by hundreds of volunteers and committed donors, Jason and his team helped grow Blandford into one of the Midwest's premier non-profit organizations, winning MiBiz Best Managed Nonprofit award in 2018.

Blandford continued to grow briskly until COVID-19 forced them, as so many other organizations, into making hard staffing and programmatic decisions. Meyer and his staff refused to hide under a rock and do nothing, looking instead for innovative solutions. However, when he floated the idea of merging or beefing up collaborations with other entities to his board of directors, there was pushback, surprise, and hesitancy to change.



The Challenge

By design, half of Blandford's board of directors come from a business background and half from the non-profit arena. This model served them well during the normal course of business, however there was disagreement about how to handle the challenges brought on by a global pandemic. Those from a business background were quick to understand the benefits of innovation; others saw Blandford as a smaller organization that had served its community well for decades; and still others "didn't understand why we had to look at new ways of doing things," Meyer says.

He realized the board had no unified vision of what they truly wanted Blandford to be: “Do we want to be adventurous, or is this who we are? Do we stay the course or take some risks?” There were lots of questions that needed to be answered, which is when Meyer turned to a friend at Design Group International for help.

The Solution

Lon Swartzentruber, the CEO and Senior Design Partner of Design Group International, shared

that when Blandford called, Meyer and the board all knew their visitation and income had been significantly reduced, but they couldn't fully agree on how to ensure Blandford's future. There was resistance to changing their programmatic model, which made Swartzentruber curious about whether they were on the same page as to the value of Blandford itself and the answers to some basic questions, such as “Why are we here? What is it we seek to achieve? What do our customers consider value? And who plays what role?”

*The board needed **a unified vision** for the future of the organization.*



Blandford Nature Center provides a safe place for students to be inquisitive.

By creating a safe place to have a brave conversation, organizational leadership, both staff and board, could tackle these questions, have candid conversations with each other, and make an accurate and collective assessment of their current situation and the challenges ahead, including finances.

This exposed some organizational cracks within the board and the challenges many had in owning their role as stewards of Blandford's mission and how best to engage with the broader community in the future of the organization, Swartzentruber says.

Design Group International approaches transformation from a different perspective than traditional consultants. Their "listening, helping, and learning" approach proved crucial. As Meyer notes, “It's inquisitive. This approach is going to make you think, circle back, test your assumptions, and ask more questions.” It was new to the board, and it drove some of them a little crazy. But those in a rush slowed down to really think things through, while more deliberative board members had space to weigh in.

This was a very important piece of the process. Swartzentruber explains that creating a place to have vulnerable conversations is essential.

“At the end of the day, process consultants will always care more about what *you* think than what *we* think. We walk alongside you, asking probing questions and deeply listening to what you have to say. In doing so we hold your response in front of you, without judgment, so that together we are able to co-create help which in turn creates opportunities for all of us to learn along the way.”

Create space for vulnerable conversations

Blandford recognized the disconnect between leadership and the board:

“Design Group International’s listening, helping, and learning approach didn’t tell Blandford what to do; they didn’t drop a list of recommendations my desk,” Meyer said, “Lon helped us get to where we could come up with our own answers and make our own decisions. He facilitated us through that.”

Once the whole board agreed what the community really wanted from Blandford, what their customers truly valued, only then could the board and leadership work as a cohesive unit and craft a plan forward.

The Results

Blandford continues to build on that momentum. Today, Meyer shepherds the **\$7 million Second Nature Campaign**, which has acquired The Highlands, a 121-acre adjacent golf course that Blandford and their partner The Land Conservancy of West Michigan are restoring to native habitats for public enjoyment. Still, “this wasn’t a metrics-driven project,” Meyer says of Design Group International’s engagement. “Board dynamics are the measurable here. It was ‘get us all on the same page’ so the vision could go forward. We never would have been able to achieve that if Lon hadn’t help us to see the disconnect.”

"Board dynamics are the measurable here..."

A unified vision allows for:

- Clarity of vision for the future
- Welcome of various perspectives
- Respect among the team
- Valued voices and opinions
- Unification around innovative solutions

A disjointed vision leads to:

- Uncertainty for the future
- Unsafe spaces to have dialogue
- Lack of alignment on purpose
- Unnecessary boundaries that limit thinking
- Resistance to change

After all, Meyer notes, consultants don't know Blandford's internal operations, they don't know the scope of everything Blandford does, so "how could they come in and give us the answer? When other consultants feel like they can, what they recommend doesn't work here."

As a result of Design Group International's engagement, "we're more unified behind a very innovative approach," Meyer says. "We have board members who are more comfortable speaking their mind because they were allowed the space to do it and nothing bad happened, while board members who tend to talk a lot are quieter and more respectful of other opinions."

Summing up, Meyer says, "When you engage with Design Group International, it might not be the process most people think about or normally go through with a consultant, but you will get what you really need in the end."



Lon L. Swartzentruber
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Let's Connect!

If you're interested in learning more about our process consulting approach, please email me at lons@designgroupintl.com or give me a call at **(616) 516-9870**.

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