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USSO 286L - Scandal

Nonprofit Misconduct;

The Tragedy of Cleveland’s Museum of Art

The headlines *read Cleveland Museum of Art confirms that an extramarital affair led to David Franklin’s resignation as director*, October 24, 2013 (Litt, 2013). Less than one half year earlier, his mistress commits suicide—who knew scandal in the nonprofit sector could be so devastating?

It is the vision of every nonprofit organization to be recognized for excellence both in its service and its public reputation. Even with the public spotlight typically focused about the charitable work in which the nonprofit sector conducts, these organizations seem to occasionally commit transgressions against the communities they support, the law, and even their own code of conducts. As a result of their own wrong doings, these nonprofit organizations are scrutinized by the public whom questions their integrity.

One local organization that was a prime example of nonprofit scandal is the Cleveland Museum of Art. Nearly three years ago, the public learned of the heartbreaking story after Cleveland Scene news first reported the abrupt resignation of longtime director and board member, David Franklin. On account of the “personal reasons” that enticed Franklin to resign, Cleveland Scene news investigated why the director of a prestigious organization would resign without ample notice (Grzegorek, 2013).

From speculation within the Cleveland Museum of Art’s staff, Cleveland Scene news reported an extramarital affair with a former employee who had committed suicide five months earlier as the reason for Franklin’s resignation—which was later confirmed by the organization itself. It is apparent that the organization’s trustees were aware of the affair at the time of women’s death, and possibly beforehand as one employee comments on the relationship as an “open secret” (Grzegorek, 2013).

A police report from the night of the tragedy details the extent of Franklin’s concerning involvement with his former employee and her suicide. It was Franklin himself who had first wondered to the scene of his mistress’s death, which had been prompted by a text message the night before, detailing the woman’s depression from work related experiences. Upon his arrival to the apartment, he enters through the back door to find the woman had died of asphyxiation by hanging. Strangely enough, the woman’s phone had managed to disappear in the moments leading up to her death and before police arrival at the apartment, raising questions of what secrets the phone may have contained and the possibility of Franklin destroying evidence (Grzegorek, 2013). Regardless of the public’s speculation, the Cleveland Museum of Art’s scandal involving the institution’s director and the tragic loss of one of its former employees is degrading to the organization’s reputation, and would have been preventable if the nonprofit had ensured an effective internal control environment for workplace relations. This paper will first describe the scandal’s effect on the organization and its associates and then discuss how the organization could have prevented the conflict.

The scandal itself was a devastating blow to the organization that upset Clevelanders and the art world community. With the turnover in the institution’s director, the fourth leadership change since 1999, the Cleveland Museum of Art saw disruption in the opening of its new West Wing galleries displaying selections of Southeast Asian art. With an estimated period of six to twelve months to replace Franklin, the $350 million dollar renovation and expansion program was left without a director, yet the eight year construction was set for opening two months after Franklin’s resignation. For a nonprofit organization that was seeking an additional $94 million dollars in donations from the art world community, the outrage brought about by the tarnishing scandal surely didn’t bode well for the organization’s request (Litt, 2013).

Arguably the nonprofit most associated with the Cleveland Museum of Art, Case Western Reserve University surely felt the effects of the museum’s booming scandal. The large effect was due to multiple events that reflected poorly upon the Cleveland nonprofit community; Case Western Reserve University was already internally handling its own scandal regarding accusations against law school Dean Lawrence E. Mitchell of sexual harassment towards women of the campus community. It is most notable to say that both organization’s suffered decreased donor donation with the lack of public trust at the time. Both nonprofit’s reliance on public approval makes them even the more vulnerable to the negative media-coverage which they had received (“Experts Say,” 2013).

Many nonprofit organizations have experienced disgrace as a result of scandal, but nearly all of these organizations would prefer to prevent their unfortunate circumstances. Both Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Museum of Art experienced absolutely preventable conflicts if they had taken the necessary measures to implement an effective and reliable internal control environment. An internal control environment is a process to ensure a workplace where “compliance with applicable laws and regulations” is mandatory. This process is influenced by the management style and policies of the board (“Internal control,” 2013).

In regards to the Cleveland Museum of Art’s situation, the “open secret” rumor spreading around the facility should have been addressed by a review board and further investigated from its beginning. The assurance of workplace safety is the responsibility of every trustworthy employee to uphold. More specifically than every employee, this scandal could find roots in the human resources department failing to ensure its checks and balances to mandate against workplace relationships. The department is partially responsible for the events that reflected poorly upon the museum.

As time has passed, the Cleveland Museum of Art has faded out of the public spotlight for the right reasons—the museum has attended to and corrected its wrong doings. It is clear the organization wishes to make amends with the art world community while it has revitalized its commitment to ethical values and integrity. As long as the Cleveland Museum of Art continues to uphold their new moral standards, then the public should be forgiving of the organization’s past mistakes.

References

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