

Liberty's Leadership Gap

by Allen Mendenhall



THE FREEMAN

SEP 01, 2025



Share



In 2009, two seasoned leaders at DonorsTrust and the State Policy Network sat across from each other, wrestling with a familiar frustration. They had watched too many promising organizations falter—not for lack of funding or passion, but for want of the

right people in the right seats. Even the most well-capitalized freedom-fighting nonprofits, they knew, were only as strong as their human capital.

Their solution was elegant in its simplicity: create an organization dedicated entirely to feeding the liberty movement's hunger for talent. They enlisted Claire Kittle Dixon, a veteran of both private-sector recruiting and movement politics, to birth what would become Talent Market, now the go-to search organization for liberty-friendly employers and job seekers.

Fifteen years later, as the stakes grow higher—and the government reaches deeper into every corner of American life—a new gap has emerged, one that threatens to undermine even the most talented organizations from within. The liberty movement has learned to recruit exceptional staff, but it hasn't adequately cultivated exceptional governance. While we've built a pipeline for program officers and policy analysts, we've neglected the boardrooms where strategy is set and accountability is enforced.

The numbers alone are staggering. Atlas Network counts over 500 partners in its constellation, and that hardly exhausts the institutional universe of liberty-minded organizations. Each represents a citadel of ideas in a great contest, yet too many are governed by trustees who mistake goodwill for competence and enthusiasm for expertise. Unfortunately, it is all too common for trustees to misunderstand the nature of their fiduciary responsibilities, failing to recognize, for example, that their duties of loyalty and care are owed to the firm itself rather than to any particular individual.

Corporate governance, that most prosaic of subjects, happens to be among the most consequential determinants of institutional longevity. A board of directors is not a sinecure for the sympathetic or a social club for the like-minded; it's the steward of an organization's mission, resources, and reputation across generations. Yet how many liberty movement trustees truly comprehend the architecture of their responsibilities? (To be fair, this problem exists outside our movement as well, in both the nonprofit and for-profit spheres, but we should hold ourselves to the highest standards possible to ensure long-term success.)

Consider the bewildering array of competencies that genuine board service demands. There is, first, the mundane matter of time: the travel schedules, the quarterly gatherings, the document reviews that separate serious governance from ceremonial participation.

But competence runs deeper than calendar management. Trustees must strike a delicate balance between missional fidelity and strategic flexibility, scrutinizing every public communication and financial statement while navigating the legal landscape their organizations must navigate.

The intellectual demands are no less formidable. Effective trustees must map the movement's factional fault lines, comprehend the different foundations' funding priorities, and grasp their organization's particular place in the liberty ecosystem, including its allies, competitors, historical grudges, and philosophical debts. They

must know which academics write authoritatively on which subjects, understand the research that informs policy positions, and maintain institutional memory across leadership transitions.

The board of a publicly traded company is often composed of former C-suite executives from other such corporations. These individuals bring with them valuable expertise in management and corporate governance, yet they may lack the philosophical grounding necessary to navigate questions unique to the liberty space. Conversely, those who do possess a deep understanding of the philosophical frameworks that animate the liberty tradition may not have the corporate or executive experience required to serve effectively as trustees.

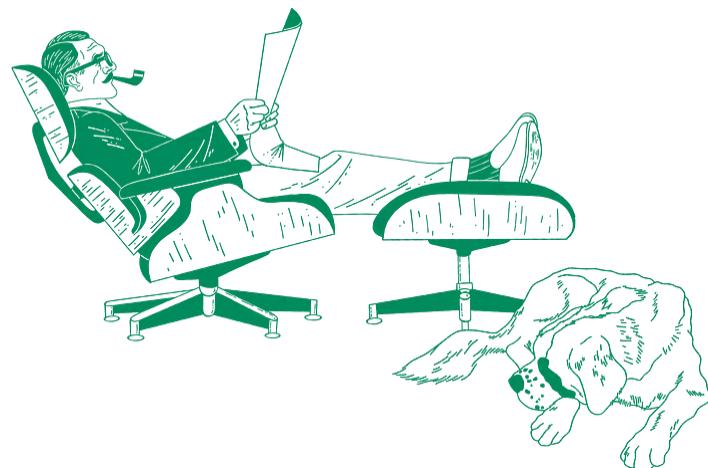
Then comes the most delicate task of all: hiring and compensating chief executives. This requires both market sophistication—understanding comparable compensation within this specialized sector—and strategic wisdom about organizational culture and direction. The board must establish structures that foster productive engagement between governance and management, while maintaining clear lines of authority and accountability.

All of this suggests an institution whose time has manifestly arrived: an organization dedicated to cultivating the liberty movement’s trustees. Such an entity would assess existing boards for competency gaps, identify and train prospective directors, and ensure that governance matches the sophistication of the ideas these organizations

champion. Good governance is not merely administrative housekeeping; it's the sine qua non of institutional survival and, in the aggregate, the vitality of the movement.

I'm too Hayekian in my skepticism of my own knowledge to prescribe exactly how such an organization would function or look: who would run it, fund it, govern it, and so forth. I'm not an entrepreneur myself, but entrepreneurs with high risk tolerance thrive on uncertainty as they synthesize disparate fragments of information into a coherent plan. I'll leave it to them to take this idea and run with it.

The liberty movement has developed a systematic approach to policy research, donor cultivation, and media strategy. The time has come to think just as systematically about the boardrooms where institutional destiny is decided.



Allen Mendenhall is a lawyer with a PhD in English from Auburn University. He is a senior analyst with the Capital Markets Initiative at the Heritage Foundation.

Subscribe to The Freeman

Launched 3 months ago

Markets, liberty, culture. We are anti-anti-anti-Communist.

[Upgrade to paid](#)

By subscribing, I agree to Substack's [Terms of Use](#), and acknowledge its [Information Collection Notice](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).



7 Likes · 1 Restack

Discussion about this post

[Comments](#)

[Restacks](#)



Write a comment...

© 2025 The Freeman · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)
[Substack](#) is the home for great culture