

Preparedness is about what institutions do before pressure arrives - because once a boycott campaign begins, the worst outcomes are usually already in motion.

Drawing on anonymised cases across theatre, music and literature, this document shows that the greatest damage rarely comes from protest itself, but from fear-driven decisions: silence replacing leadership, informal pressure displacing governance, and optics overriding process.

These failures are not inevitable. They are predictable, repeatable and preventable with clear policy, discipline and resolve.

How Institutions Unintentionally Escalate Boycott Pressure

1. Silence in place of decision

When controversy emerges, institutions sometimes avoid making a formal decision. Marketing is quietly withdrawn. Support becomes muted. The work is allowed to fail without being cancelled.

This approach feels cautious, but it creates manufactured failure. Rumours fill the vacuum. Informal blame circulates. The artist experiences the practical effect of cancellation without the protection of due process.

Leadership reminder

Silence is still a decision – and the least defensible one.

2. Allowing internal pressure to override governance

Staff concerns, petitions or informal campaigns can escalate quickly. Listening is essential, but when informal pressure begins to substitute for formal decision-making, authority drifts.

Leadership becomes reactive rather than principled. Governance structures weaken. Trust erodes, both internally and externally. Institutions appear uncertain about who is responsible for decisions.

Leadership reminder

Listening is not the same as delegating authority.

3. Conflating lawful speech with institutional liability

In moments of controversy, lawful or private speech may be reframed as a reputational threat. Institutions may respond by cancelling engagements or distancing themselves, often using values-based language to justify the decision.

Yet lawful expression is not misconduct. When due process is bypassed, responses become disproportionate. Legal exposure increases and a culture of fear takes hold.

Leadership reminder

Values-based language does not replace due process.

4. Acting quietly, then reacting publicly

Some institutions attempt to manage controversy by withdrawing work discreetly, hoping the issue will pass

unnoticed. When artists later speak publicly, the absence of transparency becomes the story.

What might have been contained becomes escalated. Credibility is damaged. Governance is scrutinised.

Leadership reminder

Lack of transparency increases risk when problems arise.

5. Cancelling to avoid imagined futures

Pre-emptive withdrawal is often driven by anticipated backlash rather than actual risk. Decisions are made to avoid what might happen, rather than in response to verified concerns.

Ironically, such cancellations frequently generate the very escalation they were intended to prevent. Once pressure fades, regret follows – but the damage remains.

Leadership reminder

Most pressure is temporary. Poor decisions last

Leadership essentials to remember

When institutions falter, the pattern is often familiar: fear replaces process, silence replaces accountability, and optics replace governance, while artists absorb the damage. These outcomes are not inevitable - they are the result of choices.

- Quiet withdrawal is still cancellation
- Internal pressure is not governance
- Lawful speech is not misconduct
- Transparency is safer than silence
- Maintaining process is leadership

Common Institutional Failures Under Boycott Pressure

The following failures recur in damaging responses to boycott campaigns. They are failures of process, not intention. Recognising them early can prevent serious damage.

- **Panic apologies**
 Apologising before establishing facts, legal position or contractual duties.
Result: implied wrongdoing, harm to artists, loss of credibility.
- **Reframing reputational anxiety as safety**
 Treating offence or protest as physical or legal risk.
Result: unnecessary cancellation and erosion of free expression.
- **Staff capture and informal decision-making**
 Letting informal groups, social media pressure or petitions determine results.
Result: breakdown of governance and leadership authority.
- **Pre-emptive cancellation**
 Withdrawing work to avoid anticipated criticism rather than actual risk.
Result: escalation, loss of trust and later regret.

- **Speaking for artists without consultation**
 Making statements about artists' intentions or beliefs without their involvement.
Result: artist isolation and reputational damage.
- **Changing rules mid-process**
 Altering criteria, policies or sponsorship terms during controversy.
Result: unfairness and long-term institutional damage.
- **Over-explaining**
 Issuing multiple statements or moral justifications.
Result: prolonged controversy and increased vulnerability.

Checklist: Institutional Preparedness

Preparedness means putting clear policies and processes in place before problems arise, so you can respond calmly and consistently under pressure.

This includes visible freedom of expression and governance policies, clear contracts, crisis and communications plans, trained staff and spokespersons, early legal advice and post-event review. These measures reduce risk, prevent panic decisions and build long-term institutional confidence.

Item

- Freedom of Expression Policy adopted and publicly visible
- Sponsorship, Gifts, Venue Hire and Donations policy adopted and publicly available
- Crisis response plan in place
- Security plan reviewed with professional input (via FITA referral if needed)
- Staff training delivered annually
- Artist and sponsor contracts include free-speech clauses
- Template public statements pre-approved
- Communications plan for boycotts and activism
- Legal counsel familiar with boycott and discrimination issues
- Designated spokesperson(s) trained
- Post-event review template

Notes

- Check FITA's sample policies
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- Includes legal, comms, and security
- Ensures safe continuation of events
- Covers protest handling & free speech
- Prevents arbitrary withdrawal
- For rapid response
- Clarifies internal process
- Early advice is essential
- Consistency of message
- Builds institutional learning