Module 1.1: Governance, Leadership & Mission

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Renz, 2004

Non-profit governing boards are "where the buck stops." At least in the US, the board oversees operations, acts as the public face of the organisation, and sets the course for the mission. Board-members are legally obligated to be conscientious leaders and act in good-faith, complying with the mission of the non-profit. As part of their fiduciary responsibility, board-members handle funds and assets as if in trust for the communities they serve; this entails external audits to "get a second opinion" of the organisations efforts and success.

Renz moves on to describe the structures and characteristics of governing boards. Most have, at minimum, a chair, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer as officers. Standing committees, special task forces, and consultants also assist the board with decisions and operations; typical committee tasks include acting on behalf of the board, nominating officers to the board, raising and managing funds, &c. Renz cautions that these committees and task forces not take over the role of existing organs within a non-profit or only as an emergency measure if they must. Beyond legal obligations, officers are expected to actively contribute to and prepare for meetings, understand the bylaws and mission of the non-profit, and work as supportive and effective leader to the organisation.

Negligent or careless officers on the board are at best unhelpful, at worst a liability to the rest of the organisation, and as such can be sanctioned for the good of the non-profit. Renz gives extra attention to conflicts of interests; such conflicts are unavoidable, but disclosing conflicts and removing the conflicted party from deliberation and decision is expected.

Armstrong, 1998

Armstrong writes that there is no consensus on *which* model of governing boards is best, only that there are various ones which are better suited to some NFPs than others. Hybrid structures, blending specific elements for a specific org, show merit. Real-world case-studies demonstrate that no matter the theoretical soundness of a particular arrangement or charter, boards never operate as imagined, so accepting this fact and working to accommodate it is key to success. A mix-and-match approach only works when it doesn't directly conflict with the existing corporate culture at the NFP and on the board itself. Armstrong is writing on the tail end of a major shift in the non-profit sector, when governing boards became focused on good governance as an aim of its own.

On two axes – Unitary/Pluralistic Vision & Stability/Innovation – Armstrong

plots four types of governance models for boards: Corporate, emergent Cellular, Constituency, and Policy Governance. The Policy Governance model was widespread and easy to understand, since it mirrors the typical arrangement of powers and duties in a for-profit company and delegates a great deal of authority to a CEO. This model's disadvantage is that the unitary vision cultivates institutional inertia and insulates the board from operations. The Constituency model features more community representatives on a governing board and "centralized decision-making from decentralized input." As a result, an organisation can find its mission changing as the constituents change interests, which is as much a benefit as a detriment. And with any large group, it is incumbent to focus shared interests to prevent self-preservation within the institutional arrangement. The Corporate model reflects, unsurprisingly, corporate culture and expectations of competitiveness and creative disruption. Here, the disadvantages are the same as with corporate culture: insensitivity to the needs of the common people, short-sightedness, and the tendency towards monopoly. Last, the Cellular model is decentralised in every sense, a battery of pilot programs and self-managing groups which share expertise. In 1998, this last model was the newest and least well-understood, but Armstrong describes its downsides as an inability to develop long-lasting superstructures and predictable resources for future work.

In the NFP sector, it doesn't really matter who carries out the task of governance, so long as it is done. The measure of success is not just survival and growth, but also accountability, which is understood to mean answerability, responsibility, and responsiveness. Independent audit teams, self-regulating accreditation associations, and citizen trusteeships are floated as compliments to state oversight for keeping boards accountable.

Armstrong discusses six measures of success from other authors, and why these measures are unattainable in practice. Without a strong leader as chairman, a governing board can sometimes be driven by a CEO rather than vice versa. To overcome catch-22s around legitimate activities, Armstrong lists successful responses from the field: clarifying the roles of each organ and officer, communicating in a timely manner between constituents and the board, and resolving conflicting interests in structured dialogue. As an organisation matures, the board will face changing strains on its governance model and institutions. Despite the optimistic notion that problems arise from process, not people, Armstrong writes that a toxic board culture or a critical-mass of sufficiently incompetent officers can obstruct a board's governance activities.

Armstrong writes that even with a sound strategy and purpose, implementing a plan is harder than anticipated. The overall trend to reduce the number of committees hasn't actually streamlined a board's work or improved efficiency; dedicated one-off task forces is preferable to a number of long-standing committees, as others have written. In the pluralistic models of governance, committees are ill-suited to assist a governing board.

Pew, 2007

The researchers found that board officers often feel listless and inconsequential in their work, especially because of their legal obligations to external oversight. According to the authors, officers think in three ways: as a fiduciary overseer, a strategic planner, and as a "generative sense-maker" for the organisation's mission. The last type was the focus of this presentation.

Generative thinking frames the problem first, and the framing cuts off some solutions from consideration. Often-times, governing boards do not participate in this process, and miss part of their other duties. The researcher described four more models for governance (by default, by fiat, by the CEO, and shared governance), and the diverging perspectives of staff vis-à-vis board members revealed no consensus on who is actually in the leadership position. In board meetings, the researchers recommend restructuring the agenda to disrupt the routine and spur people into new thinking. CEOs should also get used to power-sharing rather than approval-seeking. Getting the board officers out of their chambers and talking to staff or other governing boards helps for comparing notes and best practices.

In the Q&A at the end, the presenters clarified that board members occupy a liminal perspective within an organisation, and that they ought to be involved in decision making but not micro-manage the staff. All board members have different strengths and excel in different roles, but all of them should do some of every role at some point. Even mature governing boards have moments for generative thinking, so the advice of this presentation is useful to them as well. For oversight and accountability mechanisms such as term-limits, they are only useful if there is a clear intention and explanation for why they exist. Otherwise, they are just a band-aid for an unrelated problem.

Caldwell, 2010

The number of global NGOs had grown substantially in the years leading to 2010. Even as INGO and TAN membership expands southward, most board members still come from the Global North. In response, many have taken steps to decentralise leadership or recruit board members from underrepresented backgrounds. INGO Alliances have also pioneered transnational fundraising, but they recognise the need for national partners to develop financial independence in the long-term. With the growing number of alliance networks, keeping all sister-organisations dedicated to the same principles and mission is key, and local NGOs "falling off the band wagon" is a worrying problem. Members and elected committees can feel excluded from participation as work in these Alliances becomes more professionalised; some groups are taking measures to prevent that feeling of alienation. The question of accountability remains paramount, and INGOs are hiring independent auditors or conducting self-evaluation to assess their performance and conduct.

NGOTips, 2011

NGOTips offers a clear distinction between Governance and Management: a board governs, a staff manages. The board provides purpose, direction, and oversight for an organisation's activities; the staff implements the boards mandates on a day-to-day basis. NGOTips joins the chorus of those comparing donors to financial stakeholders, and not without cause: people want to know their charitable donation isn't being squandered. The author repeats much of the same which Renz discusses about the role and duties of a governing board. However, in the international sphere, it's important to recognise that these principles and even the words don't necessarily translate perfectly; adapting what good governance means to each location should be expected. Ensuring local buy-in for good governance practices is also essential, as is realistic expectations for success and time frame.

Donor organisations from the Global North are in the position to financially discipline the national organisations in the Developing World, like it or not. That doesn't mean it has to be adversarial: emphasising one-on-one relationships, clearly stating expectations and milestones, and offering training keeps the relationship between partner organisations across borders positive.

Writing Op-Eds

Op-Eds, so named for being the "opposite" face of the "editorial" page, are an arena for public writers to reach a broad audience. Newspapers deliberately select a diverse array of writers with conflicting view points, hoping to expose their readers to unorthodox ideas. As an editorial, Op-Eds are supposed to have an ideological bent distinct from standard journalism. This should not be at the cost of factual correctness and good faith.

For the structure of an Op-Ed, the author suggests two-thirds on describing a problem, and one-third about prescribing a solution. Begin with a Lede that makes the piece timely and relevant. Strict word-counts have to be observed, since Op-Ed writers don't have the luxury of a dedicated column and editor to trim the fat.

Op-Ed Project: Tips & Tricks

Op-Eds, being aimed at a general lay audience, are best written in plain language but with respect for the audience's intelligence. These pieces seek to influence opinion and change minds, even those who already disagree with the point being made. Approaching the opposition with understanding and respect is half the battle.

Before one writes an editorial, it not only helps to ask oneself why the reader should listen to your opinion but also to remain confident in one's expertise. Novelty of thinking is also good here: to make a contribution to the discourse

on the topic. Lastly, basing the argument on credible, verifiable evidence is always preferable to speculation.

The authors present the most basic skeleton of an Op-Ed. The hook relates to current events that make the piece timely and relevant; this segues into the thesis statement of the argument. The Rule of Three keeps the piece long enough to be substantive but short enough to be digestible; three conclusions derived from evidence support the thesis. Before concluding, anticipate counterarguments to your points. Put a bow on it by circling back to the lede.

The Lede grabs the attention of the reader and draws them to read the rest of the article. There are many ways to do this, either by ripping from the headlines or relating a personal or humourous anecdote in the back of the cab (as Thomas Friedman too often does).

When submitting an editorial, consider which outlet offers the best platform to influence the minds you want to change. National newspapers are prestigious, but an Op-Ed about Public Transportation in Southern Nashville does more good at the local level than the national. Check in with editors without appearing demanding or presumptuous, but be wary of building a reputation as a crank or fool who has nothing interesting to say . Have a backup in the event it is rejected, and don't submit to more than one paper in the same market region.

A study of the Washington Post in 2008 found that women are far less likely to have their Op-Ed; one can only hope things have improved since then. Op-Ed Project offers resources and workshops for people to hone their skills.

Bowman

Bowman says that asking someone to do something gets a better result than simply ordering them. Missions and projects succeed when volunteers and workers feel a sense of ownership, a "buy-in", to the task at hand. Positive motivations are preferable to fear of negative consequences.

Spence

Spence differentiates between leadership and management. Management is more of a one-on-one interaction, whereas leadership is a broader relationship with far more people. Leadership requires confidence and the ability to honestly reckon with self-doubt in the view of followers; management requires strong interpersonal skills to make sure a team can continue to function well.

Dudley

Dudley's lollipop anecdote reveals that leadership on a low, interpersonal level can make an enormous difference in a single person's life. Becoming aware of our potential to change each other's lives for the better prevents us from recognising our potential as leaders, and Dudley believes that more of us have the ability to lead than we think.

Krieger

First off, Krieger tells organisations forming a governing board to clarify the purpose and scope of their work is. Selecting an executive to run the organisation comes next, and the decision should be made as a consensus of the board on who the best qualified candidate is. The board should continue to evaluate the performance of the Executive officer, giving them the support and information they need to work effectively. As part of the vision of the organisation, the governing board should work with the executive to plan the organisation's activities, bylaws, and values. Board officers are also responsible for adequate resources (such as fundraising and social capital) for the organisation to carry out its endeavour. Board members should also have some skin in the game, so to speak, to show they take the organisation's mission seriously, either as a time-commitment or donation. As public ambassadors for the organisation, officers should advocate for their work. A governing board also serves as an appellate court to resolve disputes within personnel and to address ethical conflicts of interest. Lastly, a governing board should conduct regular self-assessments to see what can be done better.