

Transforming the Work of the Board: Moving Toward Community-Driven Governance - Part 1

Thursday, December 15, 2005 - Judy Freiwirth, Psy.D.

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Part 1: Re-thinking Traditional Models

“If only my board understood its roles and responsibilities!” “My board is disengaged and only some members are active.” “Our committees don’t function well.” “Our board has no leadership!” “Our meetings are boring.” “Our meetings are not well attended.” “My board doesn’t fundraise effectively.”

Do these sound like familiar complaints? Although increasing amounts of attention are being paid to new board governance approaches and the need for increased board accountability, nonprofits continue to use traditional models for their boards...ones that commonly result in re-occurring problems, yield continuing frustration, and perpetuate board dysfunction. Diagnoses for these problems tend to focus on board members’ lack of knowledge, and/or on the board’s lack of performance. Commonly, the solutions are based on the notion that the board is simply confused, or its members don’t understand their own, or the board’s, roles and responsibilities.

Looking for the “Quick Fix”; the Urgent Need for New Governance Models

Sadly, the state of the board governance and development field has not moved forward as have other areas of nonprofit capacity building. Many boards still look to “board training” as the solution to its problems and far too many consultants continue to rely on outdated generic tools that go for the “quick fix,” rather than address underlying problems with the governance model. Most books written on board governance provide “how to” advice, pointing to specific – but very generic – tools for boards to use to improve board performance. Typically, such books also offer quick fixes that often do not sustain over time, rather than address any real, underlying, systemic problems. Moreover, a substantive portion of the literature continues to advocate a “one-size fits all” board model, despite substantial amounts of research demonstrating that no single model can possibly work for every organization.

Many of us who work with boards and focus on board effectiveness and development have come to realize that the problem largely rests with the traditional governance models, or the hybrids thereof, that many nonprofits now use. The field needs an immediate infusion of new ideas, new approaches and new board models.

Performance vs. Purpose

In the book, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards [Footnote 1]*, authors Chait, Ryan and Taylor point out that the problem with boards is not a problem of performance at all, but rather, a problem of purpose; the governing work of the board needs to be meaningful to the organization’s mission and work. It is not that board members are confused about their roles; it is that they are dissatisfied with them. For the board’s work to be truly meaningful and useful, while still ensuring its accountability to the community, boards must be more directly connected to the communities

they serve.

Boards Disconnect with the Communities They Serve

Embedded in many of the widely-used board models is a fundamental problem; they often foster a tendency for boards to become so inwardly-focused that they become isolated from the communities that their organization ultimately serves. In other words, boards can become so focused on oversight of internal organizational issues that they become isolated from their constituents, and ultimately lose accountability to them.

Is it a surprise that we need to keep reminding boards to keep the organization's mission front and center? How can boards engage in true meaningful work, and make effective governing decisions based on a changing environment, if they are almost completely out of touch with the people they represent? How can boards increase their accountability to the community...if they continue to have no direct connection to it?

Expanding the traditional definition of “governance”; building true accountability

Chait, Ryan and Taylor briefly address the need for boards to have some connection to the community, framing it as “external boundary work.” They make the case, however, that “external boundary work is *preparing* for governing, not governing per se. In contrast, I would argue that engaging constituents, stakeholders, and the community in both meaningful discussions and active participation **is** a significant component of governing; in fact, boards can not be truly accountable to the community unless active engagement is part of their basic responsibilities as a board. *The board needs to move beyond the confines of the boardroom and actively engage with its constituents and the community, making them active partners in the governing process.*

Some governance literature posits that the way to become more accountable to the community is to solicit input, or to simply establish a connection. Input is often gathered by such methods as holding occasional focus groups, forming advisory councils, making site visits, and conducting surveys. These methods are limited in that they tend to be sporadic, often corresponding to the traditional three-to-five-year strategic planning process. Boards filter the collected information and sometimes use the feedback to help inform decision-making.

Community-driven Governance

Although this input can be useful, a community-driven governance model, however, goes beyond the filtering process, and provides more meaningful and active ways to involve constituents. Community-driven governance models ensure opportunities for constituents and community members to be actively engaged in key decision-making by, for example, identifying current community needs, setting future directions for the organization, and problem solving around issues affecting the community. Boards can move from “input” to “inclusion.” Aren't constituents the most important people in an organization? Shouldn't they be integral to its decision-making process?

In addition, a key premise within prevailing governance models is the principle that the Executive Director is the sole “connector” with the external world. He or she is responsible to attend coalition meetings, interact with the media, and connect with stakeholders and funders, while the board's work primarily remains confined to the boardroom. For most boards, information about the community is filtered through the Executive Director to the board. Unfortunately, this filtering process perpetuates the board's disconnection and ultimately, affects its ability to govern effectively.

In a community-driven governance model, the traditional closed boundary around the board opens so that direct information and dialogue between the board, constituents, and an organization's staff are more fluid and ongoing. Additionally, constituents are full members of the board, not just as token representatives, but as a significant portion of the composition. Preliminary research suggests that boards that have shifted to these models report that they feel more informed, that they are making more accountable and effective decisions, and are more satisfied that they are making a difference in their work.

Learning From Grassroots Movements

The governance structures for many grassroots, movement-based social justice organizations are founded on the notion that constituents – those whom the organization exists to serve – are best positioned to make key (that is, governance) decisions. In fact, community-driven governance has been successfully applied for many years within many grassroots social change organizations, nationwide.

In these organizations, it is a widely accepted assumption that the decision-making process and governing structure will be democratic, participatory and inclusive. The people for whom the organization exists will comprise the governing body, as it is understood that a grassroots organization's constituents have the knowledge, life experience, and passion to best further the organization's purpose. It may seem that community-driven governance represents a radical shift from the way boards generally operate, but as someone who has been involved with grassroots local and national political movements for over 30 years, I personally have experienced the effectiveness of such models, over time.

Strategies for Changing Assumptions about Governance

We all know change is difficult, and that it is particularly challenging for boards that have historically operated under traditional assumptions about governance. What are some specific strategies to help boards become more community-driven and accountable to the community? How does a board balance its fiduciary responsibilities with responsibility with actively involving the community in its decision-making process? In Part II of this series, I will focus on this topic: Specific Strategies for increasing community accountability and shifting to community-based governance models.

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1. Chait, R., Ryan, W., Taylor, B. *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, John Wiley & Sons, 2005.

Transforming the Work of the Board by Moving Toward Community-Driven Governance - Part II

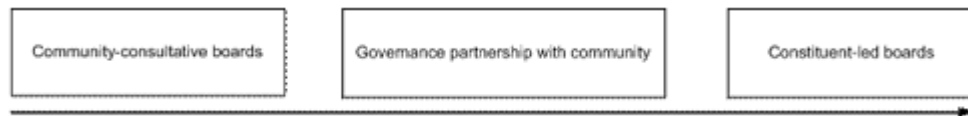
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Strategies for Shifting from a Traditional to a Community-Driven Model

Approaches to community-driven governance range along a continuum (Figure 1), according to the degree of constituent leadership that the board chooses to embrace. For example, many boards actively include the community around critical strategic decisions. Others empower their constituents to become key decision-makers. Before making any changes, it is critical for a board to discuss where it falls – and where it aspires to fall – on the continuum.

Figure 1: Approaches to Community-Driven Governance



If a board is truly to be community-driven and fully accountable, it will need to examine its own, pre-existing assumptions about its constituency. Additionally, it will need to take some active steps, designed to engage the community in the governing process. While this approach will require more than the gathering of periodic community input, its result will be a stronger and more seamless relationship between the board and the community it serves.

As discussed in [Part I of this article](#), it is important to remember that there is no one “correct” model, approach, or strategy that fits every board. In fact, decisions about board models and new approaches need to dovetail with an organization’s mission, its stage of development, its constituency or membership, and board priorities, among other factors.

Approaches Along the Continuum

– Define the Organization’s Constituency and Community and To Whom the Board is Accountable

The board must – first and foremost – be able to recognize and describe its accountability, asking the questions: How does our organization define its community? Who is our constituency? Who are we accountable to?

Why ask these particular questions first? In an alarming study of boards in New York and Connecticut published in *The Nonprofit Quarterly* (Summer 2002), Judith Miller found that when nonprofit board members were asked about their perspectives on accountability, over 70% of them believed that they were accountable only to their fellow board members, or to no one at all.

Miller also addressed the “dual ownership” responsibility that nonprofit boards have: board members have both a legal responsibility to discharge a public benefit/purpose, and an ethical obligation to meet the expectations of those on whose behalf the organization exists. John Carver, one of the founders of the more traditional policy-governance model, uses the term “moral ownership” to describe this dual role. How can a board assume “moral ownership” if it is not clear *who*, in fact, it is accountable to?

–Discuss the Board’s Assumptions about Constituents

Inherent within traditional governance models, rigid boundaries form around the board, often resulting in the board’s disconnection from the very community it is supposed to serve. The disconnection can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including frequent misconceptions and faulty assumptions by the board about the community. Particularly for boards that are not representative of their constituency, honest discussions about board members’ assumptions and perceptions related to class, race, ethnicity, and power dynamics are important. Both board and staff should spend some time reflecting, analyzing, and debating their own assumptions about the organization’s community, particularly its constituents.

Boards must also consider what constituent assets – rather than deficits – exist. Boards need to look toward “learned experience,” along with other types of expertise that constituents may bring to the table, especially during discussions that focus on constituent needs and organizational directions. These conversations need to be ongoing; a board that engages thoughtfully in such conversations will be much more successful in its subsequent steps to become community-driven.

–Expand the Board’s Role to Focus on Community-Building, and Focus on Developing Community Partnerships

Using a community-driven approach, board members significantly expand their roles as “ambassadors,” spending less time sitting in the board room and more time developing relationships with key community members and constituents. Board members become “community-builders,” who map out and actively implement strategies for developing current and new relationships with constituents, other community members and leaders, community organizations, and stakeholders, rather than leaving this task (as frequently happens) solely to the Executive Director. A community-mapping tool can be useful in helping boards identify already-established relationships and those that the organization would like to cultivate.

Multiple benefits result from the board’s community-building work. The board:

- now has first-hand knowledge about community needs, trends, and critical issues...and with that knowledge, can make more effective decisions about them, and
- can begin the process of breaking down the established “us vs. them” boundaries, allowing for opportunities of genuine partnership with the community.

–Organize Meaningful Community Dialogues, then Create and Nurture the Newly-Formed Partnerships for Learning and Planning

In contrast to hosting the traditional focus group once every three years for purposes of strategic planning, the board can regularly schedule dialogues and learning conversations with its constituents and the community. These sessions can focus on critical changes, identify constituent and community needs, plan responses, and develop realistic action plans.

Incorporating Alternative Structures and Practices into the Governance Model

As we move further along on the continuum toward governance models that are “constituent led,” it is helpful to consider some innovative alternative structures and practices that will both facilitate and solidify the board’s transformation.

–Shift the Most Important Governing (Strategic) Decisions to a Constituent-Based Decision-Making Body

In contrast with the traditional model that a majority of nonprofits aspire to – that is, a board comprised of experts from outside the community holding the governing authority – this model uses a participatory, democratic structure. The organization’s most important strategic decisions are shifted from the small group of overseers (the board) to a larger forum of active constituents (and sometimes to members of the organization).

Such participatory governance structures are sometimes called member or organizational assemblies; they integrate the principle of community self-determination, in a practical way. The sizes of these bodies can vary, from twenty-five to several hundred participants, meeting from once to several times a year. The board is generally elected by, and accountable to, this larger constituent body.

Successful examples from grassroots progressive movements have demonstrated how, when this model is effectively designed, organizations genuinely transform to become “community-driven,” and true community empowerment and ownership occurs.

–Transform the Work and Purpose of Committees

If a board is to move beyond a traditional, consultative governance model, then its committee structures must also shift from being rigidly focused on the organization’s functions (human resources, programming, facilities, etc.), to mirroring strategic priorities, instead. Rather than maintaining ongoing, standing committees, this methodology calls for more flexible ad-hoc groups and task forces that are strategy-driven, time-specific, and outcome-oriented. This allows for greater adaptability and better responsiveness to an organization’s changing priorities.

When organizational priorities shift, committee work should reflect that. Some work will be the same (focusing on internal issues, for example) and some will be new; for example, a committee might focus on developing a community education campaign around specific mission-related issue, find ways to build cultural competency within the organization, or design a grassroots, community-based fundraising campaign.

In addition to their work in implementing the board’s strategic priorities, committees need to integrate active community-building with every aspect of their work.

–Change the Composition of Committees

On community-driven boards, committee composition becomes more inclusive, with an emphasis on the working partnership among board members, staff, constituents, and community members. This provides an ongoing mechanism for board members to have a direct working relationship with the community and its constituents, and it keeps “accountability” at the front and center of the board’s work.

–Shift Some Governing (Strategic) Decisions to the Community and Across Organizations

Too often, boards make decisions that impact a community in isolation of other organizations serving that same community. Competition for funding often fuels the lack of collaboration or joint problem-solving and planning that would clearly benefit everyone. Especially for important strategic decisions that might affect constituents beyond the confines of one organization, boards may want to consider an innovative approach; that is, shifting some strategic decision-making to a collaborative governance or community-wide decision-making structure.

Such structures usually involve periodic, large-scale community-wide convenings, including the boards of the collaborating organizations and the constituents and/or clients of each organization.

This new structure is empowered with the specific responsibility for making important, strategic decisions. Between its large-scale, full meetings, a representational body usually continues to meet, in order to facilitate ongoing coordination and planning.

–Shift the Dynamics of Power: Transform the Board’s Composition to Include a Majority of Constituents

Despite a lack of research demonstrating whether board performance significantly improves when board members with professional expertise are recruited, it remains widely assumed within the nonprofit community that seeking professional experts as board members is the best practice. But is this correct? In reality, who is better equipped to understand constituent needs and challenges and determine organizational responses to them : an expert or professional from outside the community, or someone who has a personal stake in the quality of services and/or direction of the organization?

Shouldn’t “lived experience” be considered a valuable asset for boards? Aren’t constituent connections to the local media, to other community groups and institutions and to community leaders equally critical assets for raising an organization’s visibility, and furthering its mission? At this end of the continuum, constituent leadership, empowerment, and self-determination is valued and nurtured. In this model, the key decision-makers for the organization are the constituents themselves.

Transforming the Board to Embrace Principles of Self-Determination and Participatory Democracy

Community-driven governance models – particularly those in which constituent leadership is embraced – challenge much of the currently published information about the “best practices” for good governance and leadership. Such models also challenge the notion that a small group of professionals or experts can effectively govern an organization without actively partnering with the community to which they are accountable. Finally, community-driven governance models are based upon the philosophy that a constituent’s “lived experiences,” knowledge, and right to self-determination are critical values for organizations to embrace.

Based on the principles of participatory democracy, empowerment, and self-determination, a community-driven governance model can breathe new life into an ineffective board, truly transforming the nature and quality of its work.

About the Contributor



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Dr. Judy Freiwirth is the Principal and Senior Organization Development Consultant of Nonprofit Solutions Associates. She has been consulting to and training exclusively for nonprofit and public organizations for the past 30 years, primarily with community-based nonprofits. Her practice includes all major areas of organization development including, board development, strategic planning, large scale whole system change, community and organizational assessment, executive director coaching and transition, program evaluation, diversity initiatives, fundraising strategy, and human resource issues.

She is considered one of the leading trainers and consultants for nonprofits in the Greater Boston area, particularly in the area of board governance and development. She has been a keynote speaker and trainer at many national and regional conferences, including the most recent Alliance for Nonprofit Management national conference speaking on "Breakthrough Thinking in Board Governance" and the Maine Association of Nonprofits annual conference on governance.

Dr. Freiwirth is the Founder and Coordinator of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management's national network of researchers, consultants, and management support organizations around the country focused on developing new models of board governance. She also holds a doctorate in psychology, specializing in organization development.

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