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Overview

The development of effective boards of trustees is understood to contribute to the practice of effective governance (Broadbent, 1999; Carver, 1990; Eadie, 2001; Robinson, 2001; Widmer and Houchin, 2000). All too commonly, board development is focused on the task aspects of governance, such as roles, responsibilities and procedures. Research suggests that governance effectiveness is more likely when trustees function as a robust social system, when attention is directed toward interpersonal effectiveness (Alderfer, 2001; Sonnenfeld, 2002). This perspective of boards as individuals within a social system is often overlooked in the board development literature. We propose that board development practice can be enhanced through attention to the board as a community, where boards maximize their opportunity for learning and performance.

The distinction between the board as a group of individuals and the board as “community” is an important one in this paper. We suggest that an effective board community is one that directs attention toward the balancing of respect for each member with the needs of the collective as they work together toward shared goals.

This paper explores a perspective for board development that utilizes a model of community with three interrelated dimensions. These dimensions are (a) individual needs and concerns (sense of self), (b) group process (sense of group), and (c) alignment of goals (sense of meaning). The model provides a foundation for trustees to function as a community of learners and supports a holistic approach to board development.

The Board Governance Climate

In North America, demands over the last 10 years for effective governance have become insistent and public. Board governance, a topic the general populace once paid little attention to, is now frequently front page news. Enron, WorldCom, Hollinger, United Way of America and Canadian Red Cross are examples of boards who have been publicly accused of ineffective (and sometimes illegal) governance activities. Most recently, CBC TV aired a report about the Halifax Regional School Board, noting “the province is taking control over the largest school board in Nova Scotia because of its constant bickering and infighting.” (CBC News, Dec. 19, 2006). Trustees who could once presume the confidence of the public are now subjected to growing public scrutiny and demands for accountability. When one considers the amount of public dollars entrusted to boards in the voluntary and public sector, these concerns seem warranted.

The Canadian Voluntary Sector Roundtable commissioned a Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector to examine governance practices. Broadbent (1999) the panel chair, observed:

... there are approximately 175,000 Canadian voluntary/non-profit organizations in Canada. They account for \$90 billion in annual expenditures, assets of \$109 billion and about 12% of Canada’s Gross Domestic Product. They employ 1.3 million Canadians and benefit from the service of 7.5 million volunteers. Sixty percent of their revenues derive from various levels of government. The effective governance of these organizations is therefore clearly in the national interest (p.17).

Current corporate and nonprofit board literature is in agreement in its call for greater accountability and effective governance performance from trustees and boards. There is a growing conviction that a correlation exists between the effectiveness of an organization and the performance of its board (Brundey and Murray, 1998; Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1996; Herman and Renz, 2003). Improving the performance of boards and addressing particular governance concerns may be accomplished by exploring alternate ways of approaching board development.

Board Development: An Essential Governance Practice

Board development informs and educates trustees about the complex nature of governance. In recent years research interest in board governance has increased, as have the number of organizations and practitioners who focus their efforts on enhancing the practice of board governance. These efforts are important, as there may be an unrealistic assumption that individuals who join a board know what they are supposed to do when “even the most experienced individual may be novice in the boardroom” (Olson, 2002, p. 7). A two year study led by the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (2003) noted that respondents agreed about the importance of board development, “but that finding the time, staff, and money to carry out the kind of education their board needed was difficult” (p. 35).

A board is a group of people, joined together by a shared mission and mandate. Board members are motivated by an interest in ownership, a role in influencing organizational output and an opportunity to develop skills and community relationships. They must have sufficient information to do their jobs effectively, be connected in a clear

and cogent way to the mission of the organization, and know how to enact their roles and responsibilities.

Orlikoff and Totten (1998) suggest that structural approaches to board development do little to guide governance processes, because they focus on the ‘what’ of governance – the number and types of committees to have, what constitutes a quorum, and so on. The unexpressed assumption in board development literature is that board learning can be approached as a one dimensional task. While this approach may engage trustees in learning procedural rules and functional roles, we question to what degree it brings them into a community where they may share an appreciation for governance and negotiate the ways they enact their governance responsibilities. Our experience in the field suggests that boards are social entities, not static structures. Moreover, the complex and dynamic essence of boards cannot be fully appreciated without attention to the interpersonal context of governance (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A single dimensional approach does not support trustees to perform when the demands and pressures of joint decision making and other governance responsibilities present themselves.

Approaches to board learning that build on the existing strengths and knowledge of the trustees, focus on the situated and communal nature of the board and help to motivate trustees to effective governance are required in board development practices. It is our contention that attention to the shared work of the board will complement the procedural and structural approaches to board development in a way that the governing practices of trustees become stronger and more effective (Sonnenfeld, 2002). Boards interact regularly and must engage in joint activities that build relationships and trust. They must learn to function as a *community* through relationships that bind trustees

together into a productive social entity. Current board development practices can be strengthened by utilizing concepts of healthy community to support board learning.

Learning as a Social Construct

Recent research on board governance references the emergence of a social constructivist perspective as a legitimate and useful approach to the discussion of governance (Bradshaw, 2002). Social constructivism seeks to understand how we distinguish, create and recreate social actions and how they become shared awareness of particular life situations (Schwandt, 2000). This awareness serves as an interpretive lens and suggests that reality is created by individuals based on collective assumptions and shared meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Social constructivism understands that the process of knowing involves other people and is mediated by community and culture. Thus language is not only a social medium but also an important facilitator of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). These views take issue with the idea that “meanings are fixed entities that can be discovered and that exist independent of the interpreter” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 198). Driscoll (1994) argues that learners are not “empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather, they are active organisms seeking meaning” (p. 360). Constructivism acknowledges the learner's active role in the personal creation of knowledge and the importance of experience (both individual and social) in this knowledge creation process.

A social constructivist perspective recognizes the complex nature of governance and of the environment within which governance activities take place. It views governance not as fixed and inert but as influenced by settings, variables, culture and contexts. It facilitates an appreciation of the meanings that trustees construct about

governance and how they make sense of governance responsibilities. This perspective is concerned with experience as it is lived and felt (Merriam, 2001).

Wenger's (1998) work on learning in community offers the following observations about learning that are relevant to board development practices: learning is essentially social; working together is at its core; information must be placed in a social context for learning to occur; there is no distinction between learning and social participation; learning is a matter of engagement in practice; people learn as they work together and develop shared ways of doing things. Wenger suggests that learning leads "to discovering how to engage; developing mutual relationships; defining identities, establishing who is who, who is good at what, who knows what, who is easy or hard to get along with" (p. 95). These social contexts of participation and learning provide what Pratt (1998) describes as "richly textured webs of meaning that involve role, relationship and legitimate participation in a community's work" (p. 8).

In this understanding of board learning, knowledge is distributed between trustees and others in the organization, builds on interaction among the trustees, supports reflective practice and situates trustees within the realistic setting of board business.

Board Development: A Community of Learners

Gil (2001) observed that "board learning needs to be a continuing and repetitive process, incorporated into all board functions" (p. 22). Similarly, Chait, Holland & Taylor (1996) suggest that board development is a practice embedded in the issues, agendas and activities of the board. The concept of incorporating board learning into all board functions is appealing because boards are information and task driven, and their

time together is focused on the business at hand. A learning community that mediates the wholeness of the governance experience, values the differences in abilities, assumptions, and practices of every unique person (Greene, 1993; Shields 2000). While these conditions can be found on many boards, they need to be encouraged and nurtured. Stein (2002) captures the essence of a board learning community as “a group of people representing the diversity of a community coming together to create local knowledge from in-depth study of local situations, and putting what they learn into practice to bring about a desired nature” (p. 27).

The absence of evidence of best practices in regard to board development has been highlighted by Herman and Renz (2003) who suggest that board development should focus on both required and promising governance practices. This dual focus assists boards to address immediate functional and procedural issues (the what) while looking at what might help them to be more effective (the how). The following model treats boards as communities. It offers an approach to board development that extends beyond many of the standard structural functional approaches currently in practice.

A Model for Learning in Community

Assembling a group of competent individuals does not translate into a competent learning and working community. Attaining the latter requires intentionality and hard work. Boards are an organized social entity comprised of distinct individuals. It is the responsibility of the board to harness the unique needs, skills, abilities, and knowledge of its members to learn and meet organizational, board, and individual goals with a unified vision. As such, we suggest that board governance is at its best when boards negotiate the

requirements of their practice through a social context that recognizes the distinctiveness of each member, and brings this distinctiveness together within a learning community. An awareness of the board as a community precedes its capacity to become a capable governance team.

All too often board development does not go beyond an initial orientation or annual retreat. This is consistent with traditional models of group development (for ex. Mills, 1964; Thelen 1954; Tuckman, 1965; Wheelan, 2005a) where building a team is seen to be a linear process where groups move from individual issues such as inclusion and orientation through a period of conflict to interpersonal unity and performance. Board development as a one time or annual activity, focused on team building, strategic planning or sustained cooperative performance misses the mark. The model presented in this paper moves beyond the approach of board development as linear to a more holistic conception of the healthy and effective group as community constantly in the making. Development of a board community is an ongoing process that both supports, and is supported by learning.

Community has been described by Solomon, Battistich, Kim, & Watson (1996) as “a social organization whose members know, care about and support one another, have common goals and a sense of shared meaning, and to which they actively contribute and feel personally committed” (p. 236). Flynn (1989) defines community as “a group of individuals who have learned to communicate honestly with one another, whose relationships go deeper than their composites and who have developed some significant commitment” (p. 4). A sense of community helps people belong and builds commitment toward shared goals. Common to these definitions is the idea of a balance between the

individual and collective, the importance of a group process that supports open communication, and the alignment of goals. The model of community that we propose strives to build the board as such a community.

We suggest that the community dimension of boards and effective board development is developed and sustained by focusing on three factors: individual concerns (sense of self); interpersonal concerns (sense of group); and goal-clarity concerns (sense of meaning). These factors form a critical infrastructure for community performance. This framework was created through a synthesis of group development models (Cassidy, 2007) and community research and theory. We present this framework as the basis from which to think about boards as communities, and board development as learning within communities to support effective governance.

1. Sense of self

Sense of self refers to the concerns of the individual. Recognizing and valuing each individual member is a critical aspect of community development. People want to feel that they are comfortable, safe, accepted, competent, and respected as members of the communities to which they belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1954). They also want their unique identities, backgrounds, and life stories to be recognized and valued (Stangor, 2004; Greene, 1993). They want who they are and what they bring to the board to come together in meaningful roles (Napier, 2004).

People define themselves in part by the groups and histories they share (Stangor, 2004; Wenger, 1998). Trustees come to boards from various social groups and diverse histories; they may sit on a board because of philanthropic reasons, career aspirations or

ideological beliefs. Being a member of a valued social group can be related to an individual's self esteem. When people perceive that others are indifferent to them and that their presence and contributions are insignificant, their response may be to over-emphasize what makes them unique (Wheelan, 2005b). Recognizing the value of the background, culture and history that trustees bring with them contributes to the overall practice of the board. When members are recognized for their histories and unique life stories they feel more open to participating and contributing to their greatest capacity (Greene, 1993; Wenger, 1998; Wheelan, 2005b).

As members of a community, individuals take on different tasks and interpersonal roles. It is essential that these roles are not assigned based on superficial characteristics or status, but rather that the individuals assigned understand and accept the role and have the abilities and skills needed to be successful (Napier, 2004). When community members take responsibility for adding their voices to the dialogue, and work to negotiate and clarify their roles, valuable skills and understandings are used instead of lost and the potential for learning and performance is heightened (Wheelan, 2005a).

Communities are sustained through a genuine recognition of each participant. Acknowledging that each individual is appreciated and respected (Gardner, 1991; Noddings, 2002) provides a starting point for a genuine dialogue that bridges differences in ages, cultures, backgrounds, and opinions. When people are encouraged to engage in genuine conversation, greater potential for understanding emerges (Greene, 1993, Wenger, 1998). Reciprocal influence and commitment provides the balance that encourages the individual to contribute to the goals of the community, while at the same time retaining a reasonable level of opportunity for her or his own self expression.

2. *Sense of group*

Sense of group refers to the group's structure as a community. It lays the foundation for how the community will function to support open communication. Open communication is critical to a healthy learning community (Burtis & Turman, 2006). Although events will show themselves differently based on the lens of the spectator (Greene, 1993), through dialogue, participants can explore the presuppositions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings that subtly influence their perceptions. Communication can be especially challenging on boards when actions are driven by political influences or other subtle and unspoken forces. The ability to communicate openly and listen deeply will help to name and respond to these influences. Communication in this sense is the process of learning and growth. It can be considered the basis of board development.

Norms form the basis of a social structure and if chosen well, provide the structure for positive interaction and open communication (Napier, 2004; Wheelan, 2005a). Norms are collective expectations about how members should interact and how tasks and learning should be approached. People bring norms to groups and groups maintain their own norms through a continued history. The way a group interacts with each other is based on both explicit and hidden norms. Establishing norms about unimportant or ineffective things can misdirect efforts and negatively affect a group. The basis for a meaningful learning community is set through group norms that respect diversity, healthy relationships and productivity. Effective group norms allow a community to work positively together, at the same time as individuals are able to share what they consider to be important aspects of themselves. Positive group values, or

norms, can provide the basis for safe and open interaction. Shared norms within a community are the key to the coordination of efforts toward accomplishing a shared vision (Wilson & Hanna, 1993). Norms also make a significant difference to each member's satisfaction with the group and influence the group's cohesiveness (Wilson & Hanna, 1993).

Norms for an effective board community begin with a commitment to respect and care (Noddings, 1996) for each other. Care is primary to being human. People who feel cared for are more able to share their distinct perspectives and knowledge and develop a deeper sense of belonging. Effective community is also characterized by the commitment to explore both commonality and difference. Sonnenfeld (2002) describes an effective board as "one whose members know how to ferret out the truth, challenge one another, and even have a good fight now and then"(p. 113). Diversity and differences of opinion play an important role in maintaining the balance needed for community health (Weisenfeld, 1996; Wheelan, 2005b). A desire to maintain unity and cohesion can result in poor decisions, group-think, and a lack of innovation and creativity as individual self expression is crushed (Janis, 1982; Wheelan, 2005b). If differences are to be genuinely valued then people must be open to hearing voices that are different from their own without shutting down communication (Greene, 1993).

Realistic boards anticipate the possibility of conflict and effective learning communities have norms and strategies that support the productive use of conflict. Purposeful conflict resolution strategies support board members' of safety by reducing fears of rejection (Napier, 2004; Wheelan, 2005b). As individuals feel free to be

themselves, and to disagree without concern for retribution, cohesion and trust will increase (Wheelan, 2005b).

Effective communities have an open communication structure that invites participation and norms that support a sense of group.

3. *Sense of meaning*

Sense of meaning exists at the individual as well as the group level. In order to reach productive ends, a shared understanding of the group's purpose and vision should exist (Napier, 2004). At the same time, members' appreciation for how the board experience connects with personal meaning and goals contributes to perceptions of relevance. Creating relevance starts with the process of "establishing where one is trying to go, what one is trying to get hold of, and [beginning to make] progress toward it" (Bruner, 1971, p. 116).

Trustees are reliant on each other to make good decisions, are morally responsible as a group to their stakeholders, and are accountable for how they enact their governance responsibilities. It would seem that efforts by trustees to explore the relevance of their governance roles might contribute to governance acuity and to maintaining the public trust. These are essential, given governance scandals, rising public expectations and frequent criticisms of board performance (Broadbent, 1999; Gil, 2001; Holland 2002).

Pivotal to working and learning in community is a clear and shared understanding of goals. Without this shared understanding, members working toward different ends may believe they are a group but their desire for different outcomes results in separate activities. Boards have a predetermined mandate, mission and vision. They function most

effectively when their goals are clearly articulated and connected in an unambiguous and cogent way to these organizational statements.

Trustees are motivated by an interest in ownership, a role in influencing organizational output and an opportunity to develop skills and community relationships. Individual members of the board may come to the table with personal agendas and goals, and at times the goals of a particular constituency. A community is most effective when time is spent identifying and aligning goals into one common vision (Collins, 2001; Senge, 1994; Stangor, 2004). This implies the importance of taking the time to discuss purpose and goals from each member's perspective, knowledge and meaning. Members should be clear on, and see the relevance of goals in order to be successful. Setting goals is important because it is the center around which a community can orient itself. It helps to direct member efforts, improves coordination, and produces better planning and more accurate evaluation of success.

Healthy Community

A healthy board community is adaptive and able to change, fosters individual opportunity to contribute, within a context of responsibility, to completion of the tasks and fulfillment of the purposes of the board. A healthy community accepts diversity, productive dissention, change, and individual freedom within a context of responsibility to the group, while fostering interactions within and outside the group based on an ethic of respect and interest in others (Gardner, 1991; Noddings, 1992). In this idea of authentic community, members learn about themselves, reach their own goals, and contribute to the vision of the group. The capacity for self-observation and analysis of the

board's process and performance as a learning community is vital. Not only is it a hallmark of group maturity and ethical behavior, it is essential as a foundation for board development.

Bringing it together

The board is a community that contributes to and oversees organizational goals and meets external accountabilities. It is a dynamic and fluid reality with changing membership and shifting foci. A board community has a common cultural and historical heritage, shared goals, meanings and practices. New members inherit these goals, meanings and practices from previous community members' experiences. Participation in the discourse of the board, within the context of the board community, leads to the negotiation of socially constructed knowledge.

Board development utilizing a community framework approach occurs through regular and ongoing participation in all aspects of the work of the community. When the board acts as a unified group, their learning about governance becomes a joint process involving the whole board community. New members have to learn the key questions affecting the organization and how the board operates. More experienced members get a fresh perspective on their own assumptions and together, new ideas are generated.

There are times in board development where information must be explicit, formal and prescriptive. Reading a budget statement, adhering to conflict of interest guidelines, knowing the business of the organization being governed all require formal information to ensure compliance, competence and understanding. Our approach does not minimize the importance of this knowledge. Rather it creates conditions for it to occur in ways that

are embedded in the work of the board and negotiated by the community. Rarely does a board suffer from a lack of information, but rather from a lack of understanding of the culture and the context. This understanding is not found in formal presentations or specific written materials produced by the board or the organization. It is constructed within the context of the board's work and resides in trustees who are committed to putting out the required effort to enact governance responsibilities.

The three dimensions of this community model are an integral part of all board development. Sense of self, sense of group and sense of meaning function as a medium through which board learning occurs.

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