



BOARD LEADERSHIP

A BIMONTHLY WORKSHOP WITH

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Coming to Terms with Problems—Living Up to Potential

Elected Boards: Meeting Their Special Governance Challenge

BOARDS OF our bodies politic have a tough time with governance. No nonprofit board should ever look to city councils, county commissions or boards of supervisors, legislatures, port authorities, school boards, water districts, parliaments, or congresses for pointers on how to govern. These bodies are best used as examples of what board leadership should *not* look like.

And yet, in a democratic society, elected boards are the backbone of public policy, the prime channel through which people design their laws, their society, and their economies. It would seem that the sheer importance of elected bodies and their crucial role in our increasingly complicated world would compel them to be exemplars of governing leadership. But not so. If any group is utterly seized by the ghost of governance-past, it is the forum elected to conduct the public's business. Why are elected bodies perhaps more prone to micromanagement, trivia, short-term thinking, and empty rituals than their nonprofit cousins?

The similarities between the fundamental tasks of elected boards and nonprofit governance are striking and, I believe, far more extensive than elected officials would like to think. Consider municipal government. *In common with all organizations*, each city government is an enterprise with purpose and policies, with governance and management functions to be differentiated and optimized, with resources to be carefully

allocated. *In common with trade associations and professional societies*, municipal government's owners and customers are confusingly the same people. *In common with hospitals and relief agencies*, municipal government deals with intractable problems of the greater society. *In common with business*, it produces products and services for a demanding and discriminating public.

Not Like Other Boards

Despite the generic similarities of various types of governance, let's recognize that a city council or legislature is, indeed, different from a nonprofit board. One difference is that some elected bodies are imbued with what political scientists call "police power." In addition to being able to tell their employees what to do, these elected bodies have the socially legitimized authority to tell the rest of us what to do as well. That is, they have lawmaking authority.

These bodies' right to enforce their will on others lends a certain gravity to their task. Accordingly, extraordinary safeguards against caprice and mischief are warranted. More than usual public exposure of deliberations and decisions is warranted. Because their actions so directly affect the conduct of others, they encounter massive tides of public opinion at every turn. Even small decisions stimulate petitions, complaints, and criticism.

Further, individually elected officials have a very personal connection to the

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Elected Boards

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electorate. They are hired and fired by the voters. They answer to voters, not to their peers. Hence, developing group action, the cultivation of group responsibility, and the crucial establishment of a healthy wholeness in the governing body is difficult. Elected officials can consequently act like prima donnas. When a group mentality does emerge, it is as likely to be by party affiliation as by membership in the same elected forum.

City and county governments are hampered in their flexibility to deal with their daunting task because of laws that regulate them to the point of paralysis. They are the political equivalents of companies whose efficiency is mired in a procedural quagmire. Agendas reflect much that is trivial and little of the stuff of true leadership. School boards by law must themselves take action on the hiring of every teacher, a board activity as ludicrous as it is ritualistic. Do we really think the school system isn't competent to hire teachers without help from board members? If the system isn't competent to operate a personnel system without board involvement, how can we possibly trust it to educate our children?

But even if legislators had not created the tangle of laws that, in effect, *require* our elected forums to govern poorly, the iron grip of tradition would do so anyway. Old rules and old ways persist tenaciously. Congressional methods of operating—including officious micromanagement by committee—predate ideas of modern management. Consequently, the familiar committee system, detailed oversight, and lack of group discipline prevail in a body that can blame no higher authority for its rules.

When individual elected officials try to change these circumstances, the power patterns quickly become obvious. Just as in a nonprofit board, if having a personnel committee makes no governance sense, the committee may be allowed to live on simply because the committee chair will fight to retain his or her bully pulpit. Elected bodies exist in order to exercise massive power that belongs to the electorate. That very access to power

inhibits change, since change alters relationships that feed on reflections of that power.

Politicians Aren't the Real Problem

Before we blame elected officials for everything, let's admit that *we* elect them. They must be doing what it takes to get elected and to stay in office. It isn't just that officials are mismanaging governance, but that we, the electorate, tolerate and even *demand* that mismanagement.

Citizens who complain to school boards, for example, are far more likely to drag those boards into the micromanagement of bus routes and classroom practices than to spur them toward strategic leadership. Citizens write their legislators to influence a specific choice rather than to chide them toward better governance. Each of us operates much more as a customer of government than as a joint owner, even though it is the latter role that offers long-term improvement.

Because of what it takes to please us, the very visibility to which publicly elected boards are exposed is itself a big impediment to good governance. City council members, for example, are as busy posturing as producing. We the public respond to the "old politics" skills of behind-the-scenes maneuvering and lining up votes with a wink (if not with admiration), much as a slack parent would call a misbehaving child cute. Posturing even goes so far as seating arrangements. Look at the physical seating typical for county commissions, city councils, and school boards. It is invariably arranged not for the give and take struggle of constructing public policy, *but for a performance!*

Wouldn't it be refreshing to hear a city council say, "We really have no idea how to deal with the deteriorating infrastructure without massive tax increases. Let's be sure we get all the facts about the matter. We'll provide public education and carefully structured, systematic citizen input (and not just depend on whoever happens to show up for a public hearing). Then, armed with a legitimate sampling of how the public feels about this dilemma,

we have no choice but to make hard decisions about long-term municipal viability."

But we the public are as happy as the officials are to let the hard question slide. "The council a few years from now can deal with this hot potato" is a municipal equivalent of Neville Chamberlain's infamous statement of political procrastination, "peace for our time." No wonder that with the crucial need for exceptional public governance, we are more likely to get obfuscation, empty political correctness, and demagoguery. Statespersonship by individual elected officials is a rare and precious quality. Statespersonship by boards, councils, and commissions of elected officials is practically unknown.

Raising Our Expectations for Governance

Despite the unique circumstances of elected boards and the long tradition of dysfunctional practice, it is possible not only to improve, but also literally to transform governance in our elected forums. In fact, the challenge to elected boards goes beyond their own excellence: Public boards, councils, and commissions have the opportunity to be exemplars of governance—teaching the rest of us how to do it—instead of its most visible negative examples.

The long-term solution to the problems of governance—whether of elected bodies or not—lies in a general public that must be more sophisticated about what to expect from our elected forums and other boards. After all, the boards that everyone sees are city and county bodies, legislatures, and school boards. They are the forums from which we learn, and, so far, what we can learn best from them is how *not* to govern. (Can you think of a worse way for students to learn governance than to watch the typical school board?) But to teach governance by example means that elected boards must first overcome their own barriers.

When elected bodies govern in a respectable fashion, individual members of city councils will have neither the time nor the right to meddle in the public works, parks, or police departments. Senators won't be able to interfere with

bank examinations or federal housing grants. Committees of legislatures will no longer make virtually unilateral decisions about regulations in mental health or education. School boards will no longer hire school principals.

But to adopt Policy Governance, school boards and city councils must bring their constituencies along with them on their governance journey. Elected bodies would only be asking for trouble if they were to embark on such a radical shift—regardless of its benefits—without ensuring that the general public, press, unions, every pressure group, and all funding and regulating bodies understand the effort. (Boards of large membership associations are faced with a similar challenge.) This adds to the cost of making the change, but it is a cost that is inescapable under the circumstances and is, in any event, less than the cost that conventional governance currently imposes.

How will Policy Governance look in those vaulted chambers? City councils would continually weigh exactly what municipal outcomes for citizens are worth how much taxation. Should our city government produce safe streets, civic attractiveness, and potable water? If so, how much of each is worth how much taxation? What of the other municipal products? School boards would struggle with and determine exactly what skills and insights for tomorrow's adult citizens are worth what part of the education dollar. How will the resources be apportioned among mainstream kids and ones with special difficulties or special gifts?

Instead of tinkering with management, these bodies would be the electorate's hired thinkers in the business of crafting tomorrow's political reality. Perhaps it is too much to expect elected boards, councils, and commissions to be our moral beacons. But rather than being among society's most calcified elements, they should at least be the visionaries of our bodies politic. □

Case in Point

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than the specific one being discussed at this time by the board member. If my questioner's board can find what its broader concern is, then it can create a policy that covers not only the present matter but also many unforeseen ones.

This search calls for a board to ferret out its values about the presenting worry. A useful technique is for the board to ask itself, "What is it that makes staff preparedness for robberies matter?" The question seems silly at first glance. The board member in my workshop—as I questioned him in this way—found that for him the slightly broader concern underlying the robbery issue was that *staff members shouldn't be unprepared for life threatening emergencies of any sort.*

By making this observation about his own values, he took the first step in abstracting up to a higher level. What might have become a board policy prohibiting "lack of staff preparedness for robbery" now could be couched as preventing "lack of staff preparedness for conditions threatening life and limb." He and his board should not stop at this level, however. The next level up might be to prohibit "working conditions or exposures that place staff members or clients in jeopardy." Now, in a single stroke, his board would have covered not only robbery crises, but also other crises, and even beyond emergency situations to endangerment of any sort.

At each successively higher level, more and more conditions are encompassed by the policy, yet the initial concern has not been abandoned and the physical policy itself has not grown longer. Notice that if we continue to abstract up, we finally arrive at the ultimate executive limitations policy, the one that is broad enough to include all possible unacceptable staff means: "don't do or allow anything unethical or imprudent." If Policy Governance had been implemented in the first place, this broadest proscription would have already been stated, for policy making in Policy Governance always begins from the "largest end."

Pinning Down the Details

For every worry the board wishes to address, then, the board should abstract the matter all the way up to the level at which it has already spoken. Once the board has reviewed its existing policy, it can change what it has already said or add more specificity to the policy. If greater detail is added, the new policy language will be narrower than policy previously in place, but broader than the *specific issue that sparked the original concern.* After the new language receives a passing vote, the board may decide it would be wise to increase the level of detail further. This is fine, as long as it is done *one step at a time*, starting with the largest value or principle and working toward more specificity. My questioner's board could conceivably end up with a policy about robbery preparedness, but through this top-down route.

However, the original worry would probably be satisfied if the board were to state one of the higher level prohibitions, leaving an issue as specific as robbery preparedness to CEO interpretation. But the board must *always* work from the *broadest end of the spectrum*, even if, once sensitized to a very specific matter, it must painstakingly "think its way up." Routinely targeting policy on smaller issues fails to increase the integrity of the *total body of policy and swells policy documents beyond a manageable size.*

In summary, board leadership calls for developing the ability to take a particular event or concern and translating it into a legitimate board issue. The ability to abstract up prevents a board from reacting merely to a specific issue that has surfaced. Addressing the specific can quickly deteriorate into meddling in staff operations. But worse, it fails to improve the board policy that—had it been in effect—would have taken care of the matter in the first place. Abstracting up is an exercise of finding successively higher principles or values in any issue. It is a *required* skill for board leadership. □