

Enhancing the Emergent Capacity of Governance Volunteers: Arts Organizations

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Overview

A governance research project, hosted by the Institute of Nonprofit Studies, began in 2006. The project explores, in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), how governance volunteers can realize greater community impact through their work. The underlying assumption of grounded theory is that “people make sense of and order their social world even though, to the outsider, their world may appear irrational” (McCann & Clark, 2003, p. 8).

The overall project was divided into a series of smaller research segments. The first (Seel, 2006) focused on volunteer governors representing organizations from multiple subsectors (such as arts, health, human services, recreation, faith.) The second (Angelini & Seel, 2007) segment highlighted the experience of volunteer governors in Christian faith-based organizations. This paper presents the results of the third segment of research which was conducted in 2008 and is focused on governors of arts organizations.

The Approach

A peer learning circle approach was used in each phase of the research. Producing effective results at extremely low cost is one of the reasons the peer learning circle approach was selected. The other reason resides in the simple power of connecting people with each other. Governors almost always express disappointment because they rarely have the time to speak to one another. There is simply too much work that needs to get done. The peer learning circle approach affords volunteer governors the time and space to connect and problem solve with each other.

Peer learning circles are also known historically for their benefit to establishing and enriching communities (Suda, 2001). Participants in peer learning circles report high degrees of change to their behaviors and decision-making process because of the impact of discussions and reflections they have had with one another (Vygotsky, 1978; O'Donnell & King, 1999).

Central to the learning circle is the achievement of some kind of learning by the participants. Vygotsky (1978) articulated the idea that learning is socially constructed during interaction and activity with others. Research on peer learning (e.g. O'Donnell & King, 1999) has demonstrated that the interaction between members of a learning circle influences the cognitive activity and therefore, the learning that is occurring. A learning circle helps, “people to take an active stance towards life and helps overcome the tendency to be passive towards the pressures of life and work” (McGill & Beaty, 1993, p. 11).

In the learning circle conditions for creative problem solving can be created. Personal resources such as experience and knowledge can be considered by the group. Participants need to develop the skills necessary to both identify their learning needs and use the help being offered by others (Wade & Hammick, 1999). The facilitator encourages group members to explore, ask questions, critique their perceptions in the light of group input and thereby draw out the meaning within their own experiences (Burnard, 1987, p. 193).

The Arts Peer Learning Circle

To structure conversations volunteer governors were asked: What does it mean to be a governor in an arts organization? This framing question was chosen because we know that there are multiple and sometimes contradictory definitions of governance (Angelini, 2005). This implies that each volunteer governor on a board may hold a different perspective on what it means to govern. If each governor has a different perspective, governance difficulties are likely to arise. The peer learning circle conversations probed where governance difficulties are anchored and explored ways of releasing those anchors.

The arts peer learning circle was facilitated through a reflection and discussion process over a five-month period in 2008. Six dimensions of governance, further described in Table 1, focused the conversations on one governance dimension per meeting in the following sequence: Strategic, Interpersonal, Educational, Contextual, Analytical, and Political (Chait et al., 1996).

Table 1. Dimensions of Governance

Analytical	The board recognizes the complexities and subtleties of issues and accepts ambiguity and uncertainty as healthy preconditions for critical discussion. The board adopts a big picture perspective; is critical in its efforts to understand complex issues; encourages a diversity of opinions.
Contextual	The board understands and takes into account the culture and norms of the organization it governs. The board is responsive to the culture of the organization; uses the mission, values and tradition as guideposts for decisions; models and emphasizes the organization's values.
Educational	The board takes the necessary steps to ensure that directors are knowledgeable about the organization, the professions it may work with, and the board's roles, responsibilities, and performance. The board encourages ongoing learning and development; evaluates its performance; reflects on strengths and weaknesses.
Interpersonal	The board nurtures the development of trustees as a working group, attends to the board's collective welfare, and fosters a sense of cohesiveness. The board is inclusive; develops collective goals; nurtures leadership within the board.
Political	The board accepts as a primary responsibility the need to develop and maintain healthy relationships among major constituencies. The board works with integrity and respects the roles and responsibilities of other stakeholders; involves other stakeholders in their discussions; and seeks win-win solutions.
Strategic	The board helps the organization envision a direction and shape a strategy. The board builds and uses process to focus on organizational priorities; creates structure to meet those priorities; proactively deals with issues before they become crises.

Source: (Chait et al., 1996)

Learning Circle Composition & Meetings

The participants invited to the project were contacted from a list compiled through social and professional networks in the arts community in Calgary. When individuals and organizations were contacted the criteria for participation were that the governors identify that they have a governance board and the organizations is focused on arts.

There were four participants in the peer learning circle. Three remained active throughout the process and two completed all of the reflection activities

Six meetings, each one and a half hours long, were hosted beginning February 2008 through April 2008. Each meeting focused on a different dimension of governance. Time was provided at the beginning of each meeting to reflect on the previous meeting. Participants also worked individually to complete a series of questions on a worksheet highlighting a specific dimension of governance. The meetings were facilitated by two facilitators.

The project began and concluded with a pre- and post-project survey. The surveys and worksheets used in the peer learning circle are extracted from *BEING a Governor: A Process for Board Development* (Seel & Iffrig, 2006). The survey asked participants three questions. The first question asked participants to explain what governance is. The second question asked what characteristics board members should have to govern effectively. The final question asked how board members learn to govern.

The small composition of the group did not permit results that reach saturation for grounded theory. It is, however, worth reporting the results experienced. The pre- and post-surveys were not intended to generate statistically reliable results. Instead, the two surveys identify relative changes in participant perceptions from the beginning to the end of the series of meetings.

Emergent Results

Volunteer governors of arts organizations expressed challenges and difficulties in understanding their role as governors. Specifically, they talked about issues that can be categorized as involving: identity, authenticity, roles, and legacy. The indicators of the challenges are presented along with the theoretical categories in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical Categories of Being a Governor in an Arts or Arts-serving Nonprofit Organization

Theoretical Category	Indicators from the data
Core Theoretical Category Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The governors hold a “creative lens” while viewing their roles. This is evident in attentiveness to organizational culture that is not the same as board responsible for, say, human service provision. Arts groups have an audience not clients. • Board members are attentive to a sense of audience, including seeing themselves as “audience”. • Board members view a primary purpose to be the advancement of arts and culture within a social context. • Identity as an artist or supporter/advocate of the arts takes precedence over identity as a governor.
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transactional versus emotional leadership. • Applying respectful, considerate approach to reach an outcome is emphasized over the outcome itself. • Social connection and trust build cohesion, cohesion perceived as necessary for respectful discourse. • Focus on measures that give board ‘true’ indicators of outcomes of efforts. • Individual or collective power to influence others behavior and perceptions. • Permission or adherence to rules that respect the organizational way of working (policies, bylaws, documentation)
Role Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a governor am I an artist, do I represent ‘art’, or do I represent interests of artists? • Governor as audience • Governor as functionary • Governor as social advocate • What portion of the governance process does each governor own?
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the organization a community leader? • Sense of past, present, future • Expectation of loss • Role of art in society

The discussion that follows in this paper will attempt to delve further into the theoretical categories and hope that may serve governors in arts organizations in understanding what it means to be a governor.

Identity, authenticity, roles, and legacy are so tightly interconnected, that it poses a challenge to unpack each category in a linear sequence for discussion purposes. Efforts will be made to anchor the discussion through points of participant commentary related to each of the theoretical categories.

Identity

Participant Comments Regarding Identity

- Feeling heard and valued is different from everyone agreeing on a decision
- How to ensure everyone is heard?
- My board should discuss norms and culture
- It is possible to educate governors to be good governors, it is not possible to expect good governance
- I lack the trust and faith to think that if I give you the information you can take it and run with it
- No percentage of time at board meeting is spent on reflection

According to Epistemological Identity Theory (EIT) individuals seek to learn more about themselves, the world, and the relationships between the world and the person. Identity is derived when individuals can create meaningfulness out of their perception of the world and their relationship with it (Demerath, 2006, p. 492). To create meaning or to alter meaning, individuals begin to see something new or different about objects or topics already familiar to them. For individuals to find meaning in something, they need to be able to perceive that something in a unique way (Demerath, 2006, p. 492).

For identity to be fully formed, individuals also need to act on this unique perception through their communication and explicit or outward behaviour in organizational or community settings. This means that the more that governors can act in a meaningful way, the more the world becomes 'known' to them via that identity. If this occurs, the governor is likely to become more authentic in his or her activities.

This implies that for volunteer governors in arts organizations a unique experience is needed to enrich understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world around them. A lack of meaning-building in governance activities may lead to a retreat in the outward communication of a governor. This does less to reinforce what the governor already knows about the world and his or her relationship to it. In turn a sense of loss of who a governor is, and why he or she is governing, could surface. If this was the experience of a governor in an arts organization, it is entirely plausible that the governor would not be compelled to be authentic in their role.

Authenticity

Participant Comments Regarding Authenticity

- I feel left out- we're doing something not right
- Ideally we would be in a full overlap mode [the board and organization]- it means stability – interpretation is culturally symbolic – we are taught to think that alignment is better
- Be prepared to problem solve with people who may not see your point of view
- Each has own definition of what art is – how do you get over the prejudice?
- Whoever has stronger will, will make things happen
- Placing procedures over people is not a considerate way of treating people
- Norms can be readdressed by the board and redirected

Participants expressed feelings of emotional and cognitive conflict experienced in the governance process. These feelings came from a perception that their decision making did not reflect their artistic selves, their sense of themselves as governors, or fulfill their sense of how an arts organization contributes to community. Each of these points of conflict are related to the notion of authenticity.

Within person-centered psychology, authenticity is a notion that connects three parts: (a) a person's primary experience, (b) their symbolized awareness, and (c) their outward behaviour and communication (Wood et. al., 2008, p. 386). What the literature on authenticity has recognized is that a person's perception of an experience is different from the actual experience (Wood et. al., 2008, p. 386). It is impossible for individuals to close this gap between actual and perceived experience completely (Wood et. al., 2008, p. 386).

In addition, if individuals are living authentically, it is understood that what they are doing is consciously connecting what they perceive about their experience with their behaviour. Behaviour, however, is influenced by the expectations and norms of others (Wood et. al., 2008, p. 386). The challenge that governors of arts organizations face is that to be true to themselves they need to act in a way that is acceptable to: (a) their self-concept as artists, (b) the culture of the board, (c) their organization, and (d) the broader community which they envision they are a part of. Given the multiple layers in which governors act, working through differences between governors may be one of the biggest hurdles for governors of arts organizations.

Audre Lorde, cited in Tierney's *Communities of Difference* (1993), writes: "unity does not require that we be identical to each other" (p.7). Lorde's philosophy on working through difference hinges on four beliefs: (a) there is possibility for change; (b) to create change we must be involved in political work; (c) individual identity should not be discarded or denied when engaging with each other; and (d) there is hope that by working together change will occur (Tierney, 1993, p. 23). The question that follows is: could these beliefs help governors in arts organizations understand their roles?

The work on understanding authenticity within the field of psychology is still under development. However, researchers in psychology identified, as early as 1959, that "people were naturally authentic at an early age, but that this authenticity decreased later in life due to the imposition of worth" (Wood et. al., 2008, p. 397). This finding has implications in understanding how governors construct their own self-concepts of what it means to be a governor. Governing comes with a perception of status or worth within an organization. Frequently this is true within a given community as well. That very perception of status or worth in arts organizations, however, may be decreasing the authenticity through which governors conduct their governance.

Role Identification

Participant Comments Regarding Role Identification

- Asking what we've been able to do with what we've done, what we've been missing, how much we can lobby for
- Individually, education, yes, should be a priority
- We can do our own self reflection – not necessarily as a group
- How to do good board work is removed from day to day operations and purpose of the organization so may lead to loss of motivation
- Goals are owned through identification process

From the researchers' perspective there are questions underpinning the governors responses to the category of role identification, these include: How are governors attending to their individual identity? How are governors attending to the shared culture of the board? How are governors attending to the needs of the organization? How are the governors attending to the community? And, most importantly for the issue of legacy, how are governors attending to their vision of the future?

Demerath (2006) asserts that while the research on the causes of commitment remains inconclusive, "we are most likely to work to maintain those identities to which we are most committed (p. 497)." Further, if a particular identity helps use make sense and order our perception of the world around us, the more we are committed to maintaining that identity.

Governors have identities framed around social relationships. As cited in Brewer & Gardner (1996, p. 83), Breckler and Greenwald have identified that "individuals seek to define themselves in terms of their immersion in relationships with others and with larger collectives and derive much of their self-evaluation from such social identities". According to Demerath (2006), "the quantity and quality of the relationships one has with others positively influences the significance of whatever role, status, or identity those relationships are dependent upon (p. 499)."

So, for governors in arts organizations, the quantity (which includes frequency and sheer volume of) and quality of relationships are essential to the role of being a governor. As mentioned previously, the relationships are many: (a) between board members, (b) between board members and organizational administrators, (c) between board members the broader artistic community, and (d) between board members and individual artists. Weaknesses in any of the relationships listed could diminish the identity and authenticity of each governor. This could lead to a loss in effective governance.

In addition to relationships, roles are also enacted fully when the role holds meaning, "...a significant meaning, a meaning that explains our experience more and more powerfully over time" (Demerath, 2006, p. 503). What this means for the governors of arts organizations is that a governor may feel greater connection to the arts community if they have a role in that community that enriches their sense of identity. To truly have

meaning that role would need to be reinforced with some stability and frequency of involvement.

Abzug and Galaskiewicz (2001) identify constituent support as being a requirement of nonprofit boards, p. 52:

Political sociology and particularly the social movement's literature talks about organizational legitimacy in terms of constituent support. An organization is legitimate if it represents the interests or identities of different constituencies in the community. Rather than deriving their legitimacy from the state, the professions, and institutional gatekeepers, the organization gains its legitimacy from the community.

Members of the community itself need to signal to the governor that the governor is 'socially construed' as having a role in contributing uniquely to the community. The impact of activities flowing from governor to community, and from community to governor, are critical. Indeed, Demerath (2006) maintains: "An individual's social structural position will affect the degree to which she feels able to contribute to the community and, in turn, the degree to which she will tie together the meaning of the community with her own identity" (p. 504). This process helps build a governors sense of the collective self which holds internalizations about the norms of reference groups, like the board or particular communities, and links the meanings that the individual self holds in value with those meanings generated in the group (Abzug & Galaskiewicz, 1996, p. 84).

The individual governor, in articulating identity, and in reinforcing authenticity of his or herself and other governors on the board, will generate shared board culture. This culture, in turn, assists in cementing the roles of the governors within the social structure of the board, and in the community. What this implies for arts governors is that if the authenticity of the governor is weakened, or if board culture is weak, then the meaning of community in the governance work will not be strong.

Governors in the peer learning circle identified challenges in overcoming or setting aside their sense of self and needs as the 'audience' that the arts organization serves while they act in the role as governor. Some governors in arts organizations are themselves artists. Others are individuals who appreciate the role of art in society. Stability is an enabling factor for these governors.

As already noted, stability plays an important role in creating meaning. Stability here means that governance is a readily identifiable activity and the outcomes of the activity are tangible and focused. Seemingly counter-intuitive, another way that stability and commitment can be generated is to increase the exposure of members to multiple roles within an organization (Demerath, 2006, p. 511). By shifting and increasing the exposure of governors to multiple roles in the organization, governors are more likely to find something unique in each of their exposures and experiences. If those perceived unique points can be related back to the activity of governance, we are more likely to see

authenticity increase. When authenticity increases, the likelihood of governors remaining committed to their efforts will also increase. This gives voice and to governors who are also artists. It could enable the governors who appreciate art to understand it from multiple perspectives.

To realize what it means to be a governor in an arts organization, boards may want to give serious consideration to facilitating and enabling governors to explore multiple identities while governing. The governors would also need to share their learnings or perceptions of their experiences in shaping these multiple identities. In the literature on social transformation, this idea holds some merit.

Todd (2005) has studied and reported on social transformation and identity change, specifically as it relates to socio-political change on a national level. Her work has implications for this governance research. Todd proposes that over time concepts once vital and purely legitimate may be questioned by certain environmental stakeholders. From this questioning of past principles stems a ‘cultural unease’, and in some cases new practices replace old activities. These new practices may initiate a newly minted identity of the organization and institutional change (Todd, 2005, p. 430). This cultural unease may be the key to what governors of arts organizations need in order to better understand what it means to be a governor.

It is the interpretation of the researchers that governors believe themselves to be ‘functionaries’ when identity, authenticity, and community are left uncultivated. Tierney highlights the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and its basis in the Greek concept of agape. Tierney (1958) wrote: “Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. It is a willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality and a willingness to go to any length to restore community” (p.87). Based on the outcomes of this peer learning circle, if we believe that the reason nonprofit organizations exist in the first place is to create and serve community, then agape in arts organizations may become the guiding principle through which governors govern. It may also serve to build a governor’s identity and authenticity. The place to start to create change is with each individual governor, their identity, their authenticity.

Legacy

Participant Comments Regarding Legacy

- When things are going well, communicating with stakeholders on roles takes a back seat
- Constituents are likely to identify where the problems may reside
- Arts education – is it still part of what we are doing?
- Not wanting to participate anymore when decision making doesn’t meet expectations

The theme of loss was not one that was expected to surface in the peer learning circle with governors from arts and arts serving organizations. For context, the notion of the sense of loss emerged pervasively during the peer learning circle process hosted with

governors of Christian faith-based organizations (Angelini & Seel, 2007). What is instructive about this similarity of governance experience across two extremely different nonprofit subsectors, faith and art, is that meaning-building guides an individual's frame of the future (Demerath, 2006, p. 493). Meaning helps an individual makes sense of the past (Demerath, 2006, p. 493). Meaning determines how an individual responds to certain events or objects in the present (Demerath, 2006, p. 493). Demerath (2006) maintains that for something to have meaning there are three 'variables' derived from information theory and research on memory and attitudes, these are: frequency, stability, and impact (p. 493). In the context of governance, frequency would be related to how often a governor perceives something unique about a situation and that this perception helped the governor understand the world around him or herself. The impact of frequency would be fully realized when the governor was able to articulate an experience.

Stability would be satisfied when governors could point to the governance experience as something readily identifiable and focused rather than diffuse. The symbolism of coming together around a boardroom table to have governance meetings is an example of how stability is incorporated into the governance experience.

Impact is derived when a particular meaning is surfaced and then connected to help governors understand other things in the world around them or help them understand other things about themselves. When governors are exploring an issue and are able to take a step back from the issue to discuss the values, philosophy or ideology of their thinking, and then apply that philosophy, ideology, or set of values to another set of governance concerns, we would see impact coming to life.

Frequency, stability, and impact are all cultivators of 'culture' (Demerath, 2006, p. 494). Shared meaning, on which culture is premised, happens when governors actively work to maximize their unique perceptions as a group and minimize their sense of loss as a group. It also happens when governors are active in communicating, bundling, and orienting experiences to each other in a way that helps the other governors produce meaning (Demerath, 2006, p. 494). These activities reduce loss and encourage the future vision of governors to be realized, thereby generating a positive legacy.

Results

Based on the collective comments of the governors from arts organizations in the peer learning circle profiled in this paper individual governors may take steps to improve their governance experience and their governance capacity. To discover what it means to be a governor in an arts organization, governors need to talk more about themselves, what matters to them, and why. This needs to be shared candidly and frequently with fellow board members. Once shared, governors then need to act in ways that are consistent with their expressed identities. These ideas are based on the responses of a limited number of arts peer learning circle participants. It is possible that the commentary from participants may have produced different results if a larger peer learning circle was constituted.

Theoretical Statements

Based on the findings of this research, two theoretical statements can be made. The first will focus on how governors of arts organizations come to understand their role and the second will identify what they can do to enrich the effectiveness of their governance:

- I. Governors of arts organizations come to an understanding of the meaning of the role of “governor” through the broad structures of:
 - a. culture, meaning the individual’s sense of what stands as valid knowledge around the role of governor in the variety of social contexts in which the individual exists;
 - b. inter-subjectively determined relationships, meaning the collective set of mutually valid relationships that provide a social context, through communicative action, for the individual in their role as governor; and
 - c. identity, meaning how the individual comes to see themselves as a governor within the organization and their broader world (e.g., the individual may experience changes in identity as they encounter different perspectives on governance resulting in the process of categorization, de-categorization and re-categorization (Rosenberg & Trevino (2003))).

- II. In order for governors of arts organizations to govern more effectively they need to actively:
 - a. Understand their own identity needs and communicate these to their fellow board members.
 - b. Agree with their fellow board members on the principles through which the governance process will continue to enrich identity and authenticity.
 - c. Agree with their fellow board members on the future vision of the community in which the organization exists.
 - d. Seek out unique experiences as individual governors and as a group (shared culture) that further develop governance identities.
 - e. Identify a stable and frequent process in which board behavior and decision-making can be evaluated against the agreed principles for the governance process and the future vision of the community.

Conclusion

The impetus for the arts peer learning circle was to explore whether the way governors of arts organizations go about making sense of what it means to be a governor is similar to or different from the experience of governors in other subsector organizations of the nonprofit sector. Differences in the experiences of governors across subsectors are evident in the emergent theoretical categories derived in from each peer learning circle project. The experience of determining what it means to be a governor is similar for all governors in one way: the need, as governor, to communicate authentically and to build relationships that serve authenticity such that governors affirm their identities. How governors come to know their authentic selves will likely require a different process in the various subsectors within the nonprofit sector, but, for the sake of effective governance, identity-building cannot be ignored.

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