

Enhancing the Emergent Capacity of Governance Volunteers: Faith-Based Organizations

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Report Overview

This report details the progress and outcomes of the peer learning circle research project focusing on faith-based organizations hosted by the Institute of Nonprofit Studies from March 2007 through early May 2007.

The project is a continuation of a series of governance research pieces in which the ontological question, “What does it mean to BE a governor?” is explored. This specific project is framed from the point of view of governors of faith-based organizations. Based on a previous governance peer learning research project (Seel, 2006), this project examines how governors of Christian faith-based organizations understand their role as governors. Their perceptions are compared with the perceptions of governors who participated in a peer learning circle project one year previous. That particular group was composed of governors from secular nonprofit organizations. Throughout this report reflections and findings from the two groups, secular and faith, will be compared and contrasted.

To cultivate the reflection and perceptions of the Christian faith-based governors a set of six governance dimensions or themes were explored in the peer learning process. These governance dimensions (Chait et al., 1996) include: political, strategic, contextual, interpersonal, analytical, educational, and are describe in greater detail further in the report.

In addition to a discussion of project outcomes, sections have been included in this report to further explain: (a) the composition of the peer learning group participants, (b) the approach taken in the peer learning circle meetings, (c) the history and principles of peer learning circles, and (d) principles of grounded theory; each of these highly influenced the project outcomes.

The Reason for the Project

Since the Broadbent Report (Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector, 1999) was released, there has been a growing emphasis on accountability and governance within Canada’s nonprofit sector. In the report, it is stated that attention to governance and accountability would “enhance the effectiveness and credibility” of the nonprofit sector. Since then, governance as an activity became more and more associated with financial management in the minds of funders and boards of directors themselves.

It has been common practice to approach improving accountability by offering board development training with the idea that given the right mix of skills, a board of directors should be able to attend to the tasks at hand. The board training commonly available presents a very operational view on what areas boards need to be effective. Cornforth (2001) found that board behaviour and conduct, in relation to board effectiveness focuses on board size, composition and job descriptions; and processes such as meeting practices, conflict resolution practices and the relative mix of skills on the board.

While important, these operational areas of effectiveness do not touch upon how governance volunteers need to critically reflect upon what their role as a governor means. If governors indeed govern community through community-based organizations, then surely some significant portion of their accountability must be to community. Is the role of a governor to be a financial manager for funders or is the role to govern more holistically with the focus being on creating a better community?

In an examination of the governance literature we recognize multiple and sometimes contradictory definitions of governance (Angelini, 2005). A board member or a board of directors as a whole could hold multiple perspectives on what governance means. One way to understand how individuals live their role as a governor is to ask the question, “What does it mean to BE a governor in a Christian faith-based organization?”

This line of questioning does not appear in the literature on governance where, typically, governance is portrayed as a series of processes or steps such as setting the agenda, attending to fiduciary responsibilities, financial oversight, or hiring the CEO. Throughout the bulk of literature on governance that has been reviewed (Angelini, 2005), governance is treated as being the same process for all boards in all sub-sectors of the nonprofit sector. Morrison & Salipante (2007) are also beginning to embark on a line of inquiry that is currently unavailable in the governance literature. Theirs is an investigation around the theme of governance accountability. Their research efforts, like this one, is in response to observing that there are gaps in the governance literature that could begin building new governance theory and could also begin to reshape and enrich the capacity of governance volunteers to govern.

By asking the question to governors in specific types of sub-sector organizations, the answers may identify unique governance development opportunities for those sub-sector organizations, in this case: faith-based organizations.

Grounded Theory

A grounded theory approach, conceptualized by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was selected for this project for several reasons. First, a grounded theory approach presupposes that there are socially-based issues or challenges that a group of people are experiencing. Next, the grounded theory approach permits the investigation of central research questions focused on finding out what that common social issue is. The approach requires the researcher to investigate in the field directly with participants. It also permits the researcher to propose a set of future research questions that might be worthy of studying in order to generate a theory based on the results of the investigations and studies. In addition, the proximity of the researcher to the participants and to the field itself opens the opportunity for the results of the research and propositions to expand into applied practices in the community. 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). Researchers using the grounded theory approach base their inquiry on the assumption that a group shares a common social problem that is not always articulated by the group (Hutchinson, 1993). The initial aim of the research is to identify this common problem shared by governors of faith-based organizations.

Within grounded theory the quality of the resulting theoretical categories is judged against four criteria: fit, work, relevance and modifiability. Fit means that the theoretical categories underpinning the theoretical statement resulting from the research should emerge from the data and not be selected from a pre-established theoretical position. Work means that the theoretical statement should be able to explain, predict and interpret what was taking place during the study. Relevance means that the emergent theoretical statement should be relevant to the area it claims to be explaining, focusing on core problems

and issues. Modifiability means that the theoretical statement should be able to change as new data emerge and qualifications to the theory can be made.

Learning Circles

The notion of a peer learning circle goes back more than 100 years in Sweden where it is firmly entrenched in that society (Suda, 2001). More than 50% of that country's population engages with what they call 'study circles' during their lifetime. Each circle consists of five to 10 people plus a trained facilitator who work through a course of study and inquiry over at least seven sessions adding up to about 20 hours. Suda found that these study circles utilize the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point for "exploring socially relevant concepts" (p. 3). The group is provided with a study framework, reading material, other resources and structured questions to work through. The circles rely on dialogue that is both democratic and participatory. The facilitator is an equal participant rather than a teacher or keeper of knowledge (Larssen, 2000). Typically the make up of the group remains constant over the period of time agreed upon beforehand (Wade & Hammick, 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. For high-level learning to take place, the thinking and interaction within the group must also be of a high cognitive level, characterized by the exchange of ideas, information, perspectives, attitudes, and opinions. This kind of interaction generates a discussion that has thought provoking questions, explanations, speculations, justifications, inferences, hypotheses and conclusions (King, 2002). As such a learning circle is a continuous process of learning from experience through to reflection and moving to action. 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).

Giving adults greater control over what they need and want to learn and how they learn it is central to the tenets popularized by Rogers (1969) who asserts that human beings grow in capacity and need to be self-directing. This process of maturing is coupled with our psychological development where the need to take greater personal responsibility for our own lives is essential (e.g. Erickson, 1965). As mature adults, human beings need to be critical thinkers, problem-solvers, decision makers and be creative in finding solutions (Wade & Hammick, 1999). Burnard (1987) observed that while adults may accumulate a considerable amount of knowledge they may not have had any direct experience of situations about which they might have knowledge of. This difference between "knowing of" and "knowing that" is the gap that can be traversed in peer learning circles. Until an individual has encountered a situation, become engaged in it, and developed their own set of beliefs and feelings about the situation, they have not gained personal knowledge through the experience (Wade & Hammick, 1999). Experiential knowledge is subjective and unique to the individual as well as changeable over time. It combines to form a 'framework' (Ausubel et al, 1978) that can be built upon and expanded as life experiences are encountered and reflected upon.

Two of the most important elements of a peer learning circle are the opportunity for reflection and the presence of a skilled facilitator. Brookfield (1993) observes that more effective learning will take place when, instead of engaging in reflection while alone, adults reflect on their experiences while part of a learning circle. In the learning circle conditions for creative problem solving can be created and personal resources such as experience and knowledge can be focused on the issue under consideration 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). Assisting with the group process (including reflection) is a skilled facilitator. This individual 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). Critical thinking skills of learning circle participants are enhanced when the facilitator asks critically oriented questions, identifies critical incidents, supports critical analysis, and provides information requested by the group to make sense out of their experiences and perceptions.

Supporting both reflection and the facilitator is the sense of trust that develops in the learning circle over time. To enable the growth of trust within the group, all participants must come to the learning circle willing to be trustworthy and competent. The facilitator has the role of nurturing the growth of trust by establishing with the group procedural ground rules and monitoring group processes.

Methodology

This research was conceived as an exploratory study in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research would use a peer learning circle approach (Suda, 2001; Wade & Hammick, 1999; McGill & Beaty, 1993) as implemented by the Institute for Nonprofit Studies with Executive Directors (Seel & Angelini, 2004) to explore the deep issue of what it means to be a governance volunteer.

Using a facilitated process in which difficult questions were raised and reflective discussions were pursued, a peer learning circle of seven governance volunteers was convened to explore dimensions of governance.

Six domains of governance, analytical; contextual; educational; interpersonal; political; and strategic (Chait et al., 1996), were used as a discussion framework (Table 1):

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)

When the participants gathered for the first time the project was described and participants were introduced to the definitions of each dimension of governance. As a newly acquainted group they were asked to select the governance dimension that they most wanted to discuss in the subsequent meeting. Once a meeting on a particular dimension was held, the participants would reflect and together choose the next most relevant dimension they wanted to discuss at the following meeting. This process permitted participants, rather than the facilitators, to take ownership and direction in setting the discussion topics for the group. The process also enabled the group to explore the governance dimensions that they perceived as being the most urgently in need of assistance earlier in the peer learning circle experience. The Christian faith-based peer learning circle members opted to pursue the following sequence of themes (Table 2):

Table 2. Peer Learning Circle Meeting Sequence

Meeting One	Introduction to Project
Meeting Two	Interpersonal
Meeting Three	Political
Meeting Four	Analytical
Meeting Five	Contextual
Meeting Six	Educational
Meeting Seven	Strategic & Close of the Project

The Participants

December 2006 through February 2007 a total of 10 organizations were selected to become part of the peer learning circle. Of that number, seven were able to participate. One of the participants fell seriously ill during the project and that participant’s contributions are used as data from the project to the extent that they are available.

Organizations and individuals that became part of the project were contacted from a list compiled through social and professional networks of individuals involved in the faith-based community organizations in Calgary. When individuals and organizations were contacted, the project was described as an initiative focusing on enhancing governance for governance volunteers in faith-based organizations. The criteria given for participation were that the governors identify that they have a ‘governance’ board and are faith-based. All of the organizations participating had their heritage in Christianity.

The Meetings

From March 2007 through the beginning of May 2007 the peer learning circle was hosted with weekly one and a half hour meetings. Each meeting discussion centered on a different dimension of governance. Time was provided at the beginning of each meeting to reflect on the previous meeting. Prior to the meetings participants would complete a question worksheet designed specifically for the governance dimension to be discussed at the upcoming meeting. During the meetings two small groups were formed, each with a facilitator, in which participants would share their worksheet responses and discuss the meaning of similarities and differences of their responses. The meetings would conclude with a summary presentation to the entire group from each small group. The summary would highlight key learnings and challenges articulated within the small groups.

The project began and concluded with a pre- and post-project survey that asked participants to identify answers to three central questions: What is governance? What characteristics should board members have in order to govern?, How do board members learn to govern? The pre- and post-surveys were not intended to generate statistically reliable results. Instead the two surveys were intended to identify relative changes in participant perceptions from the beginning of the peer learning circle experience to the end of the experience. The surveys and worksheets used in the peer learning circle are extracted from BEING a Governor: A Process for Board Development (Seel & Iffrig, 2006).

Findings

When compared to the perceptions held by governors from secular nonprofit organizations (Seel, 2006), results reveal that governors of Christian faith-based organizations understand their role as governors in a different way than their secular counterparts. Results of an earlier 2006 peer learning research project indicate that governors from secular organizations exhibited a fairly uniform understanding of the board and its role. Governors from Christian faith-based organizations, on the other hand, expressed difficulty identifying their experience as “board governance”. In communities of faith a different nomenclature may be applied to the process and outcome of a particular set of activities that in the secular organizations is identified as board governance.

In addition, there is evidence from the Christian faith-based project that the sense of tradition in faith-based organizations often stands in the place of governance. Undertakings of the board tend to occur because it is traditional within that organization’s culture or according to theocratic principles to pursue a particular activity, rather than pursuing actions that stem from a clear governance priority.

The reflections of the participants in the Christian faith-based project also indicate that they are more likely than their secular counterparts to state that they do not reflect on or even practice “good governance”.

A comparison of the results of the Christian faith-based project to the preceding peer learning study (Seel, 2006), reveals another point of differentiation in how directors come to serve on a board. In faith-based organizations, individuals are encouraged from within the faith-community to accept a board role. This encouragement is particularly strong if these individuals exhibit passion for their faith and for the community and are regarded with respect by the community of their church or congregation. Once in the role as a director, these same individuals continue to be passionate, continue to serve the faith, however, they may not continue to govern in a way that affirms the perspectives of the congregational or church members that influenced the board member to join the board in the first place.

Results at the close project suggest that governance in faith-based organizations may be different from governance in secular or non-faith-based organizations. The primary factor that differentiates the governance experience of volunteers in faith-based organizations is the boundary between the self as an individual and the self as a member of a collective on the board. This theme has appeared in previous research pieces on governance, however, in this case, it is the content of that boundary between the individual and collective that is slightly different. Within that boundary there are challenges that emerge in the areas of: identity, social patterns, roles, and faith. This report will further detail the challenges expressed by the Christian faith-based governors in each of these areas.

The Unique Boundary for Governors of Faith-based Organizations

A reviewing the memos, worksheets and discussion notes from the peer learning circle project five themes of governance challenge were repeatedly articulated by the governors. Each theme is identified in

the remainder of this paper as a theoretical category. The core theoretical category – the single theme that binds all of the remaining themes together – is boundary identification. The five theoretical categories and their indicators from the project results are presented in Table 3.

In the remaining discussion, this paper will focus on each theoretical category as profiled in Table 3. Participant comments extracted from responses on the governance dimension worksheets and from comments made at peer learning circle meetings are included under each category to provide context and examples of the governors’ experience. To respect the privacy of the peer learning circle participants, these comments are listed without any direct identifiers. Under the discussion of each theoretical category turning points during particular peer learning circle meetings or ‘a-ha!’ moments experienced in the meetings will also be captured. Any commentary from the pre and post-project survey that is related to the theoretical categories will also be included.

Table 3. Theoretical Categories of Being a Governor in a Faith-based Nonprofit Organization

Theoretical Category	Indicators from the data
Core Theoretical Category Boundary Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • challenges in being clear whether one was a governor, a person of faith, or a member of the congregation; • challenges in identifying whether spiritual or secular laws held primacy in carrying out governance responsibilities; • tensions between the board, the clergy (e.g., ministers, pastors, etc.) and the congregation;
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anomie of governors; • board members as isolated individuals; • the board as a collective; • perceptions of conflict between being a person of faith and a governor; • changes in laity perceptions of individuals who became governors;
Social Patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uncertainty about the mission of the organization – was the mission a statement of values (i.e. Christian values) to be expressed through the organization into the world OR did the mission make explicit the means by which values were to be expressed in the world; • how governors came to be on the board; • the cultural signals from the organization aimed at prescribing the role, responsibility, limitations and expectations of governors.
Role Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uncertainty about who stakeholders are; • uncertainty about when to behave like a community member versus a board member; • cultural unease;
Faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uncertainty about whether spiritual matters or secular matters are central to governance in a faith-based organization.

Boundary Identification

Sample of Participant Comments:

“I wanted the board minutes posted at the church but there was a massive issue. The board saw the minutes as confidential. I saw the minutes as public, something the congregation would want to see.”

“We have the secular world and the religious world. Government brings the rules and policy to us and that means we hold meetings not ‘gatherings of the faith’. We need to bring faith consciously to a gathering or it isn’t there.”

“We have a strong visionary leader who is carrying the vision forward. His power is creating issues with governance. The minister has to have a voluntary accountability to the board. Challenging our spiritual leaders is contrary to the socialization we have had all through our lives in the church... The pastor also has been socialized to believe certain things about himself in that role.”

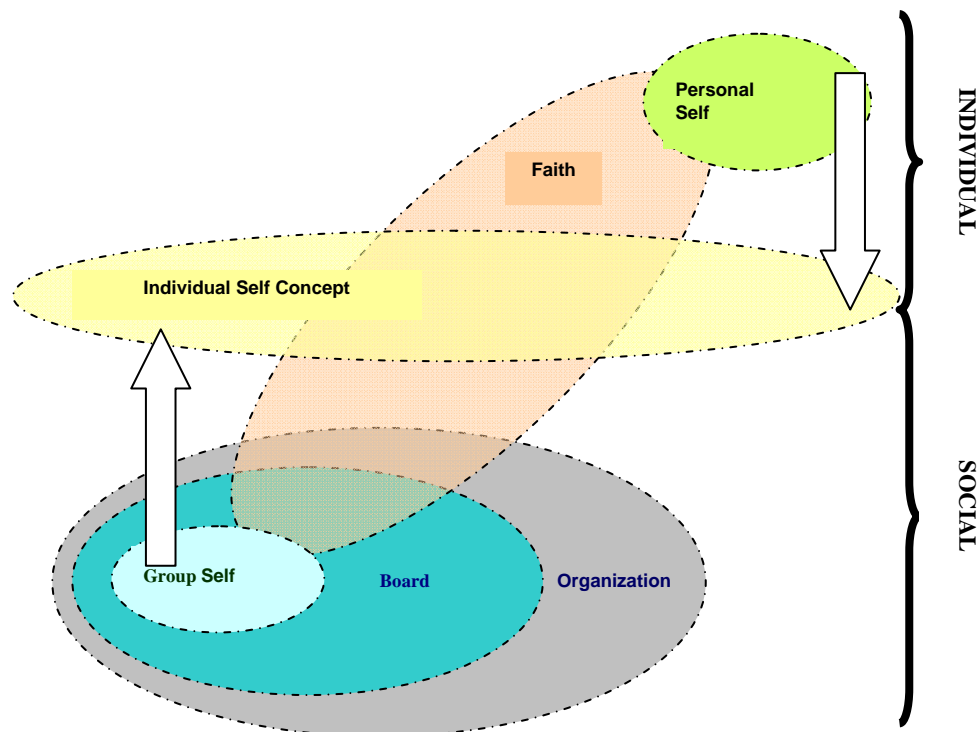
There are two distinct kinds of boundaries in the literature: symbolic boundaries and social boundaries. Epstein (1992, p. 232) states that symbolic boundaries separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity through group membership. Lamont and Molnar (2002, p. 168) add that symbolic boundaries are the means through which individuals acquire status and control resources. Social boundaries by contrast are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities. They are also revealed in stable behavioural patterns of association and manifested in connubiality and commensality” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). When symbolic boundaries become widely agreed upon, they can become social boundaries and function to constrain, exclude and segregate people.

In the faith-based peer learning circle experience the first boundary is a symbolic boundary that has to do with the individual making sense of what it means to be a director as he or she joins an already existent group. The second boundary is a social boundary that has to do with the interplay between the board as a collective entity, and the individual as part of that collective, in relation to the organization and/or community stretching beyond the organization.

The process of attempting to cross over boundaries in faith-based organizations poses challenges in the areas of: identity, roles, social patterns, and faith. Each director will experience transition of some sort with varying degrees of awareness of being in a process of transition. Existing in the boundary, is the transitional experience where individuals reshape their attitudes, knowledge, behaviours, and thinking as they move from being individuals of a faith, to being a governor of a faith-based organization. For example, peer learning circle participants have expressed that faith-based organizations are responsible for bringing about “community building and the self-improvement” of its members. As individuals move across the boundary into governance, however, community building is subject to risk assessments, and self-improvement is subject to the structural, task, and procedural mechanics of the board activities. For some governors there is a great awareness that something changed when the individual went from being a ‘member-participant’ in the organization to becoming a director. For others, there is less direct awareness about what is happening to them and why. Frustrations, sadness, or panic about what the board does was described by the peer learning circle participants who experienced this challenge with the awareness of their transition over boundaries.

Figure 1 is an attempt at a graphic portrayal of some of the bounded realities experienced by board members and their interrelationship. At the top of the diagram is what can be thought of as individual being – the person him or herself. As an individual, the person interconnects with a community of faith. It is faith that links the person to the organization which is the social structure within which the practice of faith takes place. The bottom portion of the diagram represents the social world. The organization has a board with its own identity and definition within the structure of the organization. The person moves into the social space of the organization by joining the board. When this takes place the person becomes a governor with a notion of group self. The arrows are meant to suggest that the person’s self concept – who they believe they are – is developed through experiences in the individual and social worlds through which the individual travels.

Figure 1: Crossing the Boundary from the Individual Self to the Collective



The Individual

In the case of the governors in this peer learning circle, a concept that emerged repeatedly was that of the individual self. In this individual self there exists a normative sense of what the faith-based organization and its board should be, and how the individual participating in that organization should be, as based on a set of faith-related values. These values and normative senses are deeply personal, evolve from the ability of the individual to participate in free-thinking, to seek inclusiveness, and to crave a positive and healthful future. Participants described their individual self as seeking trust, informal interactions, clarity, information, and spirituality.

The Collective

The dimension on the other side of the boundary is that of the collective, which in this project holds two meanings: (a) the group of people who are governing together for a particular organization, or the board as an entity; and (b) the group to whom particular attitudes, expectations, and behaviours are attributed by others who are not directly part of the group. This meaning of collective is derived from the external boundary of the group and assumes that the group has cohesion of thought and practice.

Within the social boundary of the board, there is a focus on formal relationships, factual decision-making, solutions, procedural fairness, and tasks. While vision and strategy are understood to be important by the collective group of governors, there is also a looming risk to establishing that direction for vision and strategy on behalf of the entire organization. The potential for risk causes the board to remove emotion and politics from their process of working with each other on the board and while working with interplay between the board and the organization. Participants in the peer learning circle described the manifestation of this risk as a turn to the mechanics of supremacy, power, authority, and control.

In addition, the collective may recognize itself as a collective, however it does not always label itself as a collective *that governs*. While governors from secular organizations have a fairly uniform understanding of the board and its role, governors from Christian faith-based organizations have difficulty identifying their experience as “board governance”. As Morrison & Salipante (2007) note in their organizational case study:

Organizational leaders...certainly do not use these labels to describe their actions. Rather, they are engaged in creating tactical responses to events and stakeholder demands. Over time, well-considered and seemingly mundane tactical responses aggregate into a pattern of organizational actions, decisions, and programs. (p. 213)

In the social cognition literature collective identity is described as how important being part of a social group is to an individual’s self concept (McElroy & Seta, 2006, p. 500). We also understand that the ‘group self’ and the ‘personal self’ are different, and furthermore that the group self influences and has impact on an individual’s self concept in a different and noticeable way than the individual sense of self does (McElroy & Seta, 2006, p. 500). This means that in the experiences of people who are part of ‘collective’ groups, like a board, there is an internally negotiated power play between the group self and the personal self in relation to decision-making and actions taken by the individual in the collective.

Responses contained in the pre and post-project surveys address the topic of boundary crossing. Post-project survey respondents indicated that learning how to govern came from *discussing the values of the organization with other board members*. In the pre-project survey the respondents identified that learning how to govern came from readings books and being mentored by someone on the board. The shift from the pre-project results to the post-project results has to do with transparency and communication between board members on values-based issues.

It would appear that following the peer learning circle experience, participants gained comfort in raising and discussing questions or topics that may have previously been assumed to be a ‘non-negotiable’ aspect of governance. Some participants had indicated in their meeting worksheets that they are informed about what governance boundaries are on a basis of what they are ‘told’ through the coded and documented guidebooks and theocratic principles issued by their church. That is to say, that for some, organizational learning about governance has not been had on an individual or group exploratory basis.

Identity

Sample of Participant Comments:

“Faith-based organizations face a duality of task. The task of faith and the task of procedure and law. We have to choose between and this creates a tension that is felt at the board level.”

“ When conflict arises, comes out into the open, people question whether you are Christian or not.”

“Divine revelation is a form of governance.”

Participants expressed feelings of internal conflict because of a perception that they had to make a choice between focusing on their identity as faith-based or on their identity as understood in the secular world. The sense of identity in conflict occurred at two levels. First, at the personal level as individual governors struggled with the outcomes and consequences of giving primacy to either faith or secular process. Second, a conflict arose around how the board functioned. The board collectively, though not always consciously, tried to determine whether their performance was rooted in the laws of the secular world or the spirituality of their faith. Participants who experienced this conflict noted a feeling of loss, disintegration, and of being ill at ease.

By the second meeting of the peer learning circle on the interpersonal dimension of governance, the question of how faith is brought into the board had already been raised. Conflict was mentioned as a common outcome of governors having different convictions about which identity should be dominate in various proceedings of the board. Conflict also arose when either the central spiritual figure (e.g., pastor, minister) of the organization or the laity perceived that the board should have a different identity than the one they selected for themselves generally or around a particular issue.

Social Patterns

Sample of Participant Comments:

“Whose responsibility is it to set realistic goals and objectives? Is this different in the faith-based world?”

“Setting goals is one thing but recognizing achievement is a challenge. We’ve never achieved them and never recognized them.”

“The board knows they need to set goals but don’t and then have a wind up barbeque celebrating the year. I can recall a congregation member asking me ‘who’s in charge the board or the minister?’ I said, ‘the board, but the congregation doesn’t know that.’”

Social Patterns exist in all organizations and influence the ways in which individuals are reshaped as they transition into a board role. They also influence the way the board absorbs or responds to individuals coming onto the board, or individuals and groups that influence the board’s work. Shifts in social patterns within the organization result whenever the organization encounters changes in the environment around it and in its interactions with stakeholders. “Negotiations must be pursued on a continual basis as circumstances change that influence mission, performance, and the composition of stakeholder groups” (Morrison & Salipante, 2007, p. 199). It should also be noted that social patterning will be influenced by whether or not the board, as a group, has been created from attachment and bonds to other members of the board, or if the board is composed of individuals with fewer personal bonds between them.

In defining governance in the pre-project survey, all seven participants identified governance as leadership, a decision-making vehicle and as carrying out a responsibility to stakeholders in the mission of the organization. In the commentary, they also identified monitoring and auditing activities against a vision and mentioned accountabilities internal and external to the organization.

In the post-project survey, responses still acknowledged the same ideas as in the pre-project survey, however, definitions of governance has expanded with more participants in the post-survey indicating:

- that governance is focused on the future more than the present,
- that governance is a means by which the interests of an organization are protected.

The noticeable difference between the pre and post-project survey responses resides in the participant's view of the present and future. Those views also include some assumptions or impressions about how the social patterns inside the organization will continue to influence the present and the future.

Role Identification

Sample of Participant Comments:

“There needs to be a catalyst to begin to study models to achieve the ends the board wants to achieve. If there is no board-minister partnership, none of the governance stuff will work.”

“Growth of the congregation destroyed my church. As the church changed jurisdictions... moving from one type of Anglican Church to another... the board decided that the time was ripe to seize control. I was the new pastor coming into the church at that time. The fighting that resulted destroyed the church... governors were no longer in control over the congregation... governors held private meetings to regain control after a key vote was lost.”

“The minister can override board decisions at our church. This has lead to the question, “Does the paid staff have the right to override board decisions?”

Role identification has to do with the processes around which governors make legitimate their activities as governors. These activities make occur in relation to the other stakeholders in the faith-based organization like the theocratic hierarchy including the pastor, bishop, and the councils. The activities may also occur with the congregation and other community-based stakeholders. While these roles are pursued with a governor's individual sense of self, there are losses to that individual self that may arise from the practice of trying to 'organize' multiple governors into formal organizational relationships. As cited in Morrison & Salipante (2007), “By commodifying and enumerating an individual's talent and skill according to a mechanistic scheme of categorization, people are homogenized and brought into hierarchical relationships” (Boland & Shultze, 1996, p. 65).

By the third peer learning circle meeting focused on the political dimension of governance, participants were identifying that in some church settings groups and individuals struggled with identifying who stakeholders were. This could be because of a reframed sense of an individual's 'role' within the organization. Identifying what the individual's role is as a board member, rather than as a community member, toward organizational stakeholders, for example, can become difficult. From that, the complexity of identifying who counts as a stakeholder is further compounded. In this research project the lack of consistency and ability in role identification of members of the board, and the board as a whole, seemed to indicate a slowing down in the process in which individual board members could realize that they had made a distinct contribution to the organization's future.

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 presents interesting ideas for the peer learning circle project. She indicates that over time concepts once vital and purely legitimate may be put into question by certain environmental stakeholders. That from this questioning of past principles stems a ‘cultural unease’, and in some cases new practices replace old activities and from that a newly minted identity of the organization forms around major institutional change (Todd, 2005, p. 430). The cultural unease was ever-present in the commentary from the peer learning circle participants during the project. Todd also identifies that in the socio-political realm, not all uneasiness is transformed into new identity. She explains that in some cases the unease that can lead to identity change will simply lead to the application of new structures onto old problems (Todd, 2005, p. 430). To unleash transformation, there is a key that allows unease to shift to identity change and for identity change to yield new structures, new futures, and release old structures and old problems.

In describing board member characteristics in the pre-project survey, all seven participants identified:

- a belief in the values of the organization,
- a commitment to the work of the organization,
- an ability to articulate a vision for the organization,
- an ability to work with others,
- common sense,
- good judgment, and
- an understanding of governor roles and responsibilities as critical.

In the post-project survey, the respondents identified all the items in bold above, and expanded the characteristics most desired with the addition of: willingness to represent the organization to the public and ability to attend board meetings and board related activities. Compared with the pre-project survey, at the end of the project respondents began to highlight the board itself as a stakeholder group (collective identity) and that the public are important to the evolution of an organization’s dynamics.

Faith

Sample of Participant Comments:

“In the Lutheran system, we have a board chair who has a way out opinion on the church. Others are on boards elsewhere. None of them address Sunday worship which is the core of what we do. Instead, they all want to do social services, youth programs, and environmental projects but don’t focus on the core value of worship. What happens with the board doesn’t focus on the core value?”

“In this whole governance thing are the issues of sin and power. Some see it as their own club. I see it as my mission to bring God to families... Using a governance system to approach change in a faith-based system is an attack, a demonic attack, on the faith. What are the processes to allow change and constructive feedback?”

“The commandment respecting elders is important but how do you respect them when the elders want to go in a direction that is not in the interests of the church?”

“For revelation to override governance you would need to have a prophetic organization. Revelation is used to shut off conversation and can be used as a bullying tactic by those wanting to control the church or congregation.”

This research suggests that faith has two dimensions within faith-based organizations. The first sense is that related to the Christian values of the organization and the board member who practices their faith within a particular community of faith of which the organization is part. It is that which makes it a ‘religious’ organization. Religion, in this sense, (*religare* – to bind to the past), is about binding individuals and groups to their tradition, their shared spiritual practice as a community of believers. The second sense of faith is that individuals hold faith or hope, or ambition that the future of their organizations and communities will be protected and cultivated positively. The future orientation is really about a sense of obligation, and at its root obligation (*obligare* – to bind into the future) refers to a commitment to those things which bind individuals and groups to creating the future. Therefore, there exists a tug-of-war in faith-based organizations between tradition and obligation.

Furthermore, in this peer learning circle project participants expressed feeling a loss of faith about the future of their organizations and their communities when discussing governance experiences. Certain dimensions of governance yielded commentary from participants that contained ‘faithful’ perspectives in terms of religion and traditionally held values, and yet other dimensions did not. Therefore, in certain dimensions of governance, as the collective, governors and boards may be acting without holding the ‘faith’ as the pre-eminent focus of their work.

Results

The results of the peer learning circle for faith-based organizations have emerged from a grounded analysis of the participant commentaries in the pre-and post-project surveys, the meeting memos taken by the two circle facilitators, and the governance dimension worksheets (Seel & Iffrig, 2006) completed by each participant.

Two theoretical statements have emerged from the work and each statement is a reflection of the disciplinary perspectives of the two researchers; different, but connected. The two theoretical statements also serve in highlighting opportunities for future research. The first theoretical statement explains what is happening when we take a faith-based organization and attempt to bring the secular concept of governance into the practices of that organization. The research indicates that blending the secular practice of governance with the faith-tradition will yield specific outcomes. The second theoretical statement identifies that once that happens, once we have *governance* in faith-based organizations, there are additional practices that need to be applied in order to help governance effectiveness. In application of the secular approach to governance in faith-based organizations, some specific dialogue and conscious decision-making needs to occur so that the two concepts, faith and governance, can indeed co-exist.

Theoretical Statements

Tensions within and between the theoretical categories outlined above create a charged atmosphere within the governance level of faith-based organizations. In working through the PLC, the opportunity resulted in governors adopting a reflective stance that encourage deliberation and some problem solving. From the research we would propose the following:

- I. The governance of faith-based organizations introduces the element of faith into a secular, largely formal and legal process of oversight resulting in:

- a. unclear and even tentative boundaries existing between roles and responsibilities on the one hand and spiritual and secular worldviews on the other;
 - b. the situation with boundaries generating mixed and confused identities for individual governors, the governance process and the organization itself;
 - c. the notion of being a governor of a faith-based organization is grounded in faith as an initial motivator for the organization, for people joining the organization and for governors who view their work as ‘service’.
 - i. conflict arising for an individual or between individuals when faith or secular governance processes are given preference over the other.
- II. In order for governors of faith-based organizations to govern more effectively they will be required to actively:
- a. make an individual choice about what comes first: secular identity, values, and measures, or faith-based identity, values, and measures. Once the choice has been made, they need to agree with their fellow board members about respecting that choice throughout their board practices;
 - b. identify what the measures of accountability that matter as individuals are versus measures of accountability that matter in the collective; and to make a decision on which accountabilities will guide decision-making of the board;
 - c. communicate and negotiate the measures of expectations, accountability and performance with multiple stakeholders;
 - d. re-establish and replenish strategies, values, and practices of the board based on a continued, negotiated dialogue with stakeholders.

Both theoretical statements and the research supporting them suggest that what might be fruitful for governors of faith-based organizations is to re-approach governance from the standpoint of that which will pull the two dimensions of the self and the collective together. Imagine that the boundary is the zipper between the self and the collective. On the end of that zipper there needs to be “the pull”, or in other words, the thing that helps both sides integrate and function constructively.

In this peer learning circle project the pull for faith-based organizations is boundary identification as a whole, and more specifically as a unique composition of identity, roles, social patterns, and faith. Each of these components will vary in the intensity and degree to which they constitute “the pull” for each different faith-based organization, however, the components appear to be consistently evident in the experience of faith-based governors regardless of which faith-based organization is profiled. In order for governance in faith-based organizations to be enriched, the transitional zones of the boundary must be consciously explored and embraced.

Conclusion

The initial impetus for the peer learning circle was to explore whether the way governors of faith-based organizations go about making sense of what it means to be a governor is similar to or different from the experience of governors in secular organizations of the nonprofit sector.

Results indicate that the experience governors of Christian faith-based organizations have of being a governor is significantly different from board members of secular nonprofit organizations. The overarching theme within that difference has to do with approaching and crossing over a boundary between the individual self and the collective (as the board – a symbolic boundary; as the organization – a social boundary) within the field of faith.

Future Research

What has emerged from this research experience also stretches beyond the initial question about whether governors of faith-based organizations make sense of governance differently from their secular counterparts. There are further opportunities for the development of governance theory and capacity of governors of faith-based organizations, and for governors in other nonprofit subsectors.

One line of research, for example, could be focused on the evolution and transformation of governance within faith-based organizations. The data of this research project appears to indicate that there are enablers and barriers that exist during cultural unease in an organization; what those are remains unidentified to-date. If that is the case, the assumption is that there are factors that will permit the unease and upheaval in organizations to transform into an identity change in faith-based organizations. Identification of what the barriers and enablers are to the transformation, the trigger points along the transformative journey, and what governors have to do with the enablers or the process itself could prove useful as we continue to seek to enrich the capacity of governors to govern, and attempt to expand current notions of governance in the literature.

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